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DUNGEON DIVE

Aim for the Deepest Level



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Dungeon Dive Glossary

THE DUNGEON

An enormous ruin located in a settled landmass. It's said to have been born a thousand years ago. If you say the words "the Dungeon," this is the ruin that will come to mind for everyone. Viewed from afar, it looks not unlike a colossal tree bearing blooms made of magic gems. As a rule, it winds farther and farther underground. At present, it has been cleared up to Floor 23. Rumor has it there are one hundred floors in total.

THE DUNGEON ALLIANCE

The five nations that surround the Dungeon. They are Whoseyards, Vart, Laoravia, Eltraliew, and Greeard. Each of those nations' primary religion is the Church of Levahn, and each is actively trying to clear the Dungeon in order to discover that which might benefit them.

THE CHURCH OF LEVAHN

A religion that began to permeate the land around a thousand years ago. While they worship a variety of gods, adherents venerate the Saint and the Apostle in particular. Their policy is by and large a peaceful one, and the religion is, at its roots, philanthropic in nature.

DUNGEON DIVERS

People whose livelihood revolves around exploring and exploiting the Dungeon. As the Dungeon Alliance has encouraged the delving of the Dungeon, many have become divers. Outside of the Dungeon Alliance, they're called adventurers.

MAGIC/SPELLS

Denotes the turning of magic power into some other kind of power. Legend

has it that the Saint of the Church of Levahn constructed the basics of magic. The fundamental elements are fire, water, earth, wood, and wind. Another type that is often used is "holy" magic. Subdivisions include sun, ice, crystal, moon, and life magic. There are also minor elements, such as light, darkness, dimensional, star, and blood magic.

MONSTERS

The animals that appear in this world and act hostile toward people. The term is vague; ferocious animals will often be called monsters even if they don't possess magical power, and gentle-natured animals will be called monsters if they do possess it. All animals that appear in the Dungeon are lumped under the term as well.

MAGIC GEMS

All stones imbued with magical power. Gems dropped by monsters, gems extracted from mines, and gems supplied by magic artisans are magic gems. In this world, jewels and magic gems are in voluminous supply—the amount that can be mined from the earth in this world surpasses that of the world our protagonist comes from by leagues, and that's on top of the gems dropped by Dungeon monsters.

LEY LINES

Lines made with melted jewels and magic gems. A general term used for any line crafted to be able to transmit magical power. They serve various purposes, from relaying information to transferring energy to aiding spells.



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Chapter 1: Dungeon in Another World

【SUMMON】: Welcome back, Aikawa Kanami.

The white text floated in a patch of darkness not unlike a lake at night. That darkness, however, swallowed the message before I could finish reading it. I felt nothing as I watched it unfold, remaining in a daze. It hadn't been enough to rouse my senses.

No, it wasn't anything I *saw* that jolted me back to consciousness. It was that *smell*. That nigh painful smell invading my nostrils even as I was assailed by an uncomfortable sensation of sludge inching up my throat.

Spurred by those intolerable irritants, my eyes snapped wide open and were promptly assaulted by the sight of a black wall inlaid with blurry smears of white. It didn't take much looking around to realize that "wall" was in fact the ceiling.

I picked myself up and took in my surroundings. I had been lying on the floor of a stone corridor. There was no way light could penetrate this place; I had the dimly glowing stone walls to thank for being able to glean what information I could.

Installed in a nook of the corridor was a small sort of altar, though it took me a fair bit of careful observation to recognize it as such, given it was close to crumbling from all the wear and tear of age. On top of the moss-ridden altar lay what remained of two candles, and there was what looked like an animal's pelt offered up next to them. The pelt had an old-timey arrow stuck through it.

The words dribbled out from inside my throat as though somebody were smoking them out of me. "Wha... What is this? I don't understand... It's so creepy..."

My heart started racing, nearly bursting inside my chest. It was just as I'd squeaked out—I was dumbfounded. I had no grasp of my situation whatsoever.

Wait, I thought to myself, didn't I go to sleep in my bed at home as usual?

Yet there was no warm bed to be seen here—no loud mechanical alarm clock, no sunlight bleeding through the curtains, no light bulbs to illuminate anything. Before me was only the dirty, cold stone floor, the freaky dim lighting provided by the stone, and the horrid nose-scrunching stench. Nothing was familiar, and nothing was pleasant.

I groaned, putting a hand to my mouth as I waited for the urge to vomit to subside, but a distant roar prevented me from taking a moment for myself.

“GRAAAAHHHH!!!”

Something told me this was not the bellow of a rational creature. Its doleful bloodlust nearly made me jump out of my skin.

“Is... Is that *howling*? Wait, hold on! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

I hadn’t the foggiest what was happening. I couldn’t even comprehend the words spilling out of my own mouth. Bewildered and off-balance, I ran in the direction opposite the growling and howling, rushing down the corridor, its stone path glowing softly, eerily, creepily. No matter how many twists and turns it took me down, the scenery stayed the same, and as panicked and fretful as that made me, still I ran.

Soon, my ears were met with a disgusting splat, and I found I had stepped on something hard to the touch. I looked under my sneaker and saw a bug the size of a fist crushed and chittering in its death throes. I yelped at the grisly scene. I wasn’t particularly scared of bugs, but in the concrete jungle I grew up in, I had never encountered an insect of such massive proportions. The revulsion was visceral.

The dying bug screeched; it almost sounded like it was crying for help. I stood there, horrified, but then I looked up, my eyes landing on the next turn in the path, from behind which a man-sized insect was peeking out. Its gargantuan frame beggared all common sense. Its shrill chittering was cacophonous, its angular bug appendages in constant motion. At a glance, it resembled a stag beetle, yet its twin hornlike protuberances chipped away at my sanity.

At this point, I was a mess of exclamation points and question marks. I couldn’t even make a peep, assuming it would provoke the monster and spell my end. So I turned on my heels and ran in the other direction. I ran and ran,

never looking behind me. I didn't choose what path to take; I just let my instincts take the reins—pulling away from that monster was my sole driving force.

I sprinted until my stamina gave out, and I started slowing down. I tried to catch my breath, and that restored a modicum of composure.

“Wraaahh!” The incensed beast’s roar echoed. It sounded closer this time. Idiotically, I had run right back to the place I had first come from. The blood drained from my face, and I froze. But thanks to my drawing closer to the beast’s howls, I could pick up other noises as well—specifically, the sound of people talking.

I couldn't make out what they were saying, but as if guided by an invisible light, I began walking in the direction of their voices. The slow-moving gears in my head craved the company of others. The company of my fellow human beings. I was also drawing closer to the cries of the monster in the process, but at least I could start to discern what the voices were shouting.

“Back away from it!” a man cried to his nearby comrades. “Back away, and buy time!”

They were right out of a fairy tale. For one, their attire was far from normal. One wielded a wooden bow and wore leather armor of the kind you'd never see outside of a museum. Another was waving around a plain-looking greatsword with all his might. And a third was shooting fire from her entirely nonmechanical wooden wand. None hailed from any reality I recognized.

What's more, they were jockeying around an enormous wolf over three meters tall in the middle of the corridor. I wasn't brave enough to jump into the fray. All I could do was stand still a distance away and watch.

The man who had the air of a leader pointed at the warrior brandishing the greatsword. “If we can buy enough time, it'll all work out! Stand firm!”

The swordsman held his greatsword aloft and attempted to strike the wolf, which reacted by tackling him with unnerving speed, sending him hurtling toward the other end of the corridor like a rubber ball. The beast next laid its eyes on the woman holding the wand. The others formed ranks to protect her.

“Regroup! Strike where it leaves itself open!”

On those orders, they backed away from the wolf, leaving me the closest human to it on the battlefield. This presented both a good opportunity and a clear and present danger. I was frightened and confused. If I’d been able to calmly analyze my situation, I could have simply hidden somewhere. But all I could do was stand there in a stupor. Then, my eyes met those of the leader guy, who was wielding a rapier.

“Wha... Who are *you*?!” he barked, surprise written all over his face.

I snapped to my senses and immediately pleaded, “I, err, I got lost. P-Please, help me!”

My legs were slowly taking me over to him. My words were halting, but even so, I had faith he would understand.

“*Help* you? Are you insane?” His words were a knife of ice that gutted that faith.

“Huh?”

The man hadn’t even said no. His open contempt told me he viewed my plea as outrageous and out of the question. Of course, if I’d had my wits about me, I would’ve realized these people barely had their own situation in order. They weren’t in a position to spare me any mind, nor were they that type to begin with. I should’ve accounted for their equipment and weaponry, the ferocious monster, and the fact that their predicament was dangerous as hell.

I didn’t, however, possess that level of clarity at the moment. And that’s what decided the outcome.

“This is the Dungeon. Not to mention we’re outside the Admin Area. Weren’t you prepared for this going in, ya dumb kid?”

His words stabbed me like a dagger. And then, his non-metaphorical sword came at me. A blazing heat flared in my thigh.

“Arrrrrrgh!” Seeing that I had been stabbed, I fell onto my backside.

“We got a solo-er!” shouted the leader. “Everybody fall back! He’ll be our bait!”

I had no clue what that meant. No—I didn't want to acknowledge what it meant.

The wand woman looked at me and passed by without a word. The warrior who had been blown away just looked at me coldly, as did the rest of the group. None of them said anything as they fled behind me, which meant that, naturally, the colossal wolf sprang straight toward *me*.

I screamed, terrified, and attempted to leap away, but the stinging that ran through my leg wound caused me to tumble clumsily. Now that its other enemies had fallen back, the wolf approached its newest and closest prey. In its savage eyes and razor teeth, I could see my own gruesome demise.

My head was swimming, a whirlpool of negative thoughts and feelings. My life and experiences flashed before my eyes.

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

A mysterious text display popped up in the corner of my eye. But that was the least of my worries. There was no way I could comprehend what that was about, yet my brain, belying the storm of emotions in my heart, started to become less hazy. The whirlpool of doom and despair in my head abated, the resentment ebbed away, and I was able to focus on a way out of these dire straits.

My unmuddled mind selected the best course of action. Avoiding using my wounded left leg, I stood up with only my right. At that very instant, the wolf attacked. I leaped to the side and ran, but I was nowhere near fast enough to escape. As I passed by the beast, its claw rent the upper part of my right arm. A dolorous tingling gripped my arm, but I didn't have time to lick my wounds.

Just then, I heard one of the people who had moved to safety. "Good, right there! Now shoot! Block the way!"

Chills. It was then I remembered the wolf wasn't my true enemy. *Those bastards! They made me their decoy, turned tail, and now they've got the gall to do this?!*

I looked behind me, fearing the worst, and saw an all-encompassing blast of flame heading my way. The wolf didn't fail to notice it, but it was too late. It had sprung forward to bite me to death, and as such, it couldn't avoid the wall of fire. Needless to say, I, too, lacked any means of escape. The fireball exploded with the wolf and me at its epicenter, igniting everything in its blast radius. I threw up my hands to protect my head and dropped to the ground as I jumped as far away as possible.

A fiery shock wave slammed into my back, blowing me away. My whole body was scorched by flames as I was rocked by the excruciating sensation of being flayed alive. But I used that agony as a wake-up call and kept my cool. My hate and frustration were my vim and vigor.

I'd been blasted to the ground, but soon I slowly opened my eyes and examined my surroundings. The fire that had engulfed the area was already gone, like magic. Yet a neat wall of flames blocked the path through which the others had escaped.

"So... So tha..."

The words "so that's what they were scheming" died before they could come out; my burnt throat wasn't working properly. My eyes, however, were functioning normally. With the path out of the corridor well and truly cut off, all that was left were the wolf and me.

We got back to our feet, the both of us. The wolf was visibly weaker now, most likely because it had been mid pounce, effectively covering me, when the fireball struck. It also had more surface area to burn, so its wounds were even graver. It staggered, its breathing labored, but there was still fire in its eyes. Its will to fight hadn't diminished in any way. It paced over to me as it howled, as if to say, "You should see how fearsome a wolf gets when it's injured."

The wolf steeled its resolve, and I mine. By chance, I'd landed in a favorable position. Though the wolf probably couldn't see it, a greatsword lay behind me. It was probably the sword the warrior from earlier had been using. If I could

sneakily make use of it, I'd be opening up a chance of victory, albeit a tiny one.

I turned my back to the wolf and ran with all my energy. The moment I about-faced, I saw the wolf pounce from the corner of my eye. Searing pain shot through my left thigh, and alarm bells blared in my head, but I ran regardless, forcing my now numb foot to pound the floor.

I couldn't pinpoint the right time to counterattack, nor could I accurately predict how the wolf would come at me. All the same, I picked up the greatsword with whatever strength I could muster and slashed at it as I turned to face it. The sword was so heavy that I couldn't hold it up even using both hands, but I poured my might into the swing of the blade. It was all riding on this moment.

With a fleshy, muffled stabbing sound, the greatsword sank into the wolf's hide.

"YES! Ah, urgh!"

My joy was premature. With the sword still lodged in its neck, the wolf's giant body bore down on me. I was able to narrowly avoid its fangs, but I couldn't dodge its massive frame of over three meters. Its unbelievable weight crushed my body, and the contents of my stomach spewed out of my mouth.

Even as its neck was being torn to shreds, the wolf was trying to extinguish my life in its jaws. It opened its maw wide in a bid to swallow my head, but I snapped myself back and dodged by wrenching my body to its absolute limit. Then I capitalized on the recoil by digging the sword even deeper into the dread beast.

"You stupid goddamn—"

I waved my arms as if expecting to fling its three-meter body to the curb. All that did was open up a small gap between us, but to me, in that moment, it was the greatest outcome I could have hoped for, allowing me to escape from beneath it. I let go of the sword and put some distance between the two of us before peeking back at it. It was no longer attempting to pursue me. I could sense that it wanted to push itself forward, but its battered body wasn't cooperating. The beast's blood spilled out profusely, its insides burned to cinders.

Still, I couldn't let my guard down. I continued observing the wolf from a distance, and that was when I noticed—its right eye had been destroyed by the fire, and arrows were stuck deep in its hind legs. The sword must have penetrated its respiratory tract, since the sound of its breathing had become a meager flute's whistle.

A word escaped my lips: "You..."

The wolf doggedly dragged its mutilated form my way. To make doubly sure, I kept to the blind spot created by its burnt eye. It collapsed shortly thereafter. Its blood had pooled into a veritable lake, and it was only barely breathing. The instant it stopped breathing, it started emitting a faint emerald green light and faded away. The sword and arrows that had been stuck in the now nonexistent wolf clattered to the ground.

"Huh?"

That's right.

The thing had simply vanished, leaving no corpse behind. It had disappeared like it had only ever been a figment of my imagination. The only thing that remained in its wake was a shining green gem on the floor.

Then, another text display box silently hit my retinas:

Title gained: Dawn of Deep Green.

+0.10 to Str.



After slaying the wolf, I cautiously examined my surroundings. The situation I now found myself in felt unreal; by all rights, I should have been more discombobulated than before. Yet I was oddly calm, able to operate as if I was just ignoring the tide of confusion.

I gathered what had been dropped in the wake of the fight against the wolf, pilfering the majority of stuff that seemed useful from the corpses, which must have been its prior victims. I didn't feel guilty about it. For one, it was necessary, but even more salient was the fact that I had been numbed to

feeling. Nothing ran through my head. I was merely doing my best to survive the day.

The resources the bodies had on them were sundries indispensable for surviving this place. That was the cold calculus. I put on the equipment I stole piece by piece: leather gloves, a mantle, a leather bag about my waist. I inserted as many strangely shaped knives into the belt of my jeans as I could, and I carried a one-handed sword.

As I purloined what I could from the corpses, I faced them and pressed my hands together in a prayer gesture. Lastly, I looked toward where the wolf had vanished. The greatsword that had been wielded during the battle was on the floor. I wanted to use it, but it was about twice the weight of the one-handed sword. Toting that thing around wasn't realistic. No, what really caught my attention wasn't the sword, but rather the shining green gemstone. There were many like it among the cadavers' valuables as well. I had decided that if I tried taking them with me under the present circumstances, they'd just be dead weight—a liability that could spell my demise. So I'd refrained from placing any in my bag.

The color of this particular gem, however, was quite similar to the hue of the wolf's fur. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I put two and two together. Preposterous as it was, I was somewhat confident I was right: in this place, objects were left behind when one took out a monster, and this gem was no exception.

It was a maudlin thought, but I figured maybe a strange kinship could have developed between me and the wolf. We'd both been attacked by those humans, after all. I picked up the stone and put it in my pocket.

"All right, now what?"

I'd done what I could up to that point. If some sort of hostile creature appeared, I had a means of counterattacking. Now I had to decide whether to wait there or to keep moving.

The gash in my thigh was shallower than I'd thought. Most likely, my body had flinched away reflexively. However, while stanching the bleeding through pressure had made it somewhat better, merely walking still proved

troublesome. Movement increased the bleeding, and it was a safe bet that I'd lose my stamina, which in turn threatened death. There could be no doubt that moving too much came with a serious risk to life and limb.

On the other hand, waiting motionlessly was also a terrifying prospect. What I'd just gone through had been too frightening to make waiting for someone to save me a palatable idea. There were the monsters, but worst of all, the grim impact of having humans with whom I had pleaded for help simply cut me down had taken root in my heart. Even if I were to wait for someone, it was doubtful I could get whoever conveniently appeared to actually help me. So I chose to stay on the move.

"Guess I'll use this sword as a cane..." I leaned on my sword to see how it felt. It wasn't terribly suited to being a walking stick.

"If only I had better stuff. A better *tool*," I said, as I scanned my vicinity once more.

【ITEMS】

Empty

Text displayed in midair met my eyes.

"Huh? What the... Huh?"

My confusion revved back up, as did my sensation of being unmoored from reality. A hoarse laughter came from my throat.

The text was displayed in a clean textbox that seemed to float within arm's reach, like garbage glued to my retinas. No matter where I looked, it refused to disappear, much like a pop-up in some video game. There was no doubt now—in this space, such textboxes were something I'd keep seeing. It was then that I knew.

"Ha, ha ha... I mean, it's just like..."

It was just like a video game.

I had low-key felt the words "video game" shaking in the back of my mind the

whole time. There was the fantasy world. The Dungeon. The monsters—a giant insect, a giant wolf. The adventurers—the swordfighter, the archer, the flames of the mage. The way the slain shone upon dying. The shiny gem. The text message following a battle. The information menus and textboxes. Items in general. All common fixtures of video games.

Everything felt upside down, topsy-turvy. It was so surreal that all the colors around me might as well have been inverted. But I accepted it. I accepted the video gameness. And accepting my new reality was comforting, in a way. If my sheer terror ebbed, that was enough for me. I still wanted to run, but I could feel my horizons getting wider and wider, like I was in a dream.

“All right, if that’s the case, then first things first. Show me about me.” I figured it was worth a shot.

【 S T A T S 】

N a m e : K a n a m i A i k a w a

H P : 4 / 5 1

M P : 7 2 / 7 2

Class :

Level 1

S t r 1 . 1 1

V i t 1 . 0 3

D e x 1 . 0 1

A g i 2 . 0 2

I n t 4 . 0 0

I stopped trying to parse it halfway through. It was all English. “Man, I’m having trouble understanding this. Wonder if I can make it easier to read.”

Then the display box switched languages:

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 4/51

MP: 72/72

CLASS:

LEVEL 1

STR 1.11

VIT 1.03

DEX 1.01

AGI 2.02

INT 4.00

MAG 2.00

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 1.01, Blood Loss 0.52

EXP: 805/100

EQUIPMENT: One-Handed Steel Sword, Otherworld Garb, Elven Cloak, Leather Gloves, Otherworld Footwear, Spellseal-Inscribed Throwing Knife

“Ah, there we go; now it’s in Japanese.”

The menu had responded to my muttered musings. Compared to the English-language display, the strings of Japanese characters looked awkward, but it was more important that I understood what was written at a glance.

As I read through my stats, what jumped out at me most was my empty item inventory. Taken at face value, that meant I was considered to be bereft of all things.

“Hmm...but I mean, I’ve got jerky and water...”

And yet:

【ITEMS】

Empty

I checked and rechecked, but based on the text, I had nothing at all on me.

“Still, I do have a rough idea of what to do now. I’m a gamer, after all...”

I figured it hinged on whether I met certain criteria. There was some rigid, childish, video gamey condition that I wasn’t fulfilling.

“‘Equipment’ must be stuff that directly impacts combat and affects stats...”

Which meant everything else was stuff that was meant to be equipped. Stuff I shouldn’t put on my body or hold in my hand.

“Maybe I’ve got some kind of infinite-space bag or something?”

I checked everything on my person once more. Video games often had something that fit that bill. I turned my bag and pockets inside out and right side in multiple times, but nothing happened.

“All right, then...” *C’mon, enter... Enter into my inventory.*

Half-jokingly, I tried profering my jerky to the air—and was rewarded for it.

The air warped and distorted, swallowing the jerky whole.

“Yikes!”

My arm snapped back. The scene would spark fear in anybody.

“Okay, now show me my items.”

【ITEMS】

Jerky

“Ha ha. Yep, I’m super definitely in a video game.”

I was equal parts pleased and terrified, but in any case, I now understood one

of the rules of how items worked. By willing it, and by offering the item to empty space, I could store something who-knew-where.

“Now that’s a huge relief...”

I started scavenging valuables from the corpses again, as there was a ton of stuff I hadn’t been able to take with me before. One after the other, I tossed them into my inventory, all the while learning more of the rules that governed items here. Incidentally, the adventurers’ bodies and the small bugs on them failed to enter. I didn’t know why, but they must have violated some condition because the air rebuffed them.

【ITEMS】

Jerky, Water Pack, Styptic, Oil, Stun Needle, Antidote, Rasp, Blade of Oria, Leather Bag, Leather Gloves, Leather Shoes, Cloth Garb, Wooden Bow, Steel Knife, Unbranded Arrow, Lighter, Smartphone, Pebble, 10th-Grade Magic Gem, 9th-Grade Magic Gem

The lighter and smartphone were in the jeans I’d had on. I tried connecting to data the moment I spotted my phone, but of course, no dice. Moreover, chances were good it was broken anyway. Maybe it had taken a hit. That its flashlight and clock functionalities were still working was a silver lining.

“All sorts of stuff can go in...” I mused. “Most helpful of all, it names the stuff I can’t identify. But that lowers the whole game’s difficulty level. Not that I’m complaining...”

I smiled when I saw the word “antidote” for a substance I would’ve otherwise regarded as “just some powder.”

“All right. Let’s run some more experime—”

“GRRAAHWR!!!”

Just as I was about to set about experimenting in earnest, a beastly howl reverberated through the corridor.

“I...I’ll save the experiments for later...”

Thanks to the string of convenient windfalls, I’d straight up forgotten I was still in the jaws of danger. I didn’t know how to use the styptic salve, so I smeared it on my wound after washing the gash with water. Then I started trudging away from the howling, using my sword as a cane.

So as not to overtax my body, I proceeded down the hall while watchfully observing my surroundings. I checked my stats and found that my blood loss had eased and my HP had recovered a little.

Sensing that I’d put a safe distance between me and the threat to my life, I’d earned myself a small spot of calm, which I used to conduct various experiments. I couldn’t remove objects from or put them into my inventory unless I was still, but there was something I could test out while walking: I muttered all the terms that came to mind, rattling off anything I could think of that had to do with video games in case any new text displays popped up. “Stats... help... map... save... logs... chat... log out... log in... skills...”

There’d been no response to the word I had most wanted to trigger something: “Help.” Nor was there any response from words related to online games, such as “logs” or “chat.” The word “skills,” however...

【SKILLS】

Innate Skills: Swordplay 1.01, Ice Magic 2.00

Acquired Skills: Dimensional Magic 5.00

???:???

???:???

A pair of powers concealed by strings of question marks. This system seemed unwilling to give the goods when it came to those two bits of info. And those two instances of “magic” took me aback as well. I’d blinked, and before I knew it, I’d become a mage. Something to be happy about! It occurred to me to make the menu display the details of my magic.

【MAGIC】

Ice Magic: Freeze 1.00 Ice 1.00

Dimensional Magic: Dimension 1.00

I'd braced myself for nothing to appear only to be pleasantly surprised by not one but *three* spells up my sleeve. At the revelation that I could cast spells, I damn near jumped for joy. I had no idea *why* I could now use magic, but I figured I might as well use whatever was in my arsenal. Going by video game logic, it made sense to have a handful of starter skills.

Well, that's if you're going by video game logic...

I shook my head to stop that train of thought. If my mind stuck to *that* morass, I'd go nuts, so I started testing my spells instead. I couldn't do much better at that moment.

"Err, come forth! Icespell: *Ice!*" I shouted, holding out my hands. My mental picture involved chunks of ice flying from my hands.

Upon casting the spell, I was assailed by the sensation of something inside me depleting. My palms turned cold, and I could feel something (what, I didn't know) gathering. Yes, it was gathering, coalescing, but it was awfully slow. I suspected the moisture in the air was coming together and losing its heat by suppressing its molecular motion, thereby gradually creating ice. However, the ice that took around ten seconds to form was the size of my palm. Needless to say, it was not shooting off. It didn't look as though it could ever be a means of attack.

"Wait, *that's* what this is?"

My disappointment was immeasurable. My day...

At a guess, I surmised this spell was for everyday life. Based on what I'd faced thus far, I'd been expecting a flashy spell that could fend off giant insects and beasts and the like, so I couldn't help but feel bummed out. That said, I *had* just created some ice, and it would've been a shame to waste it, so I fetched some clothes out of my inventory, cut a part of them off, and fashioned a makeshift ice pack, which I promptly discarded once I applied it to my wound and found it

led only to a dull pain. Frankly, I felt the spell called *Ice* had proven utterly useless.

Next, I tried out the spell named *Freeze*, but that ended much the same way. The effect was far from pronounced, as all it did was cause the temperature in my vicinity to drop slowly.

The last spell, *Dimension*, worried me a great deal. If I remembered my English right, the word meant something like “measurements” or “proportions,” or “plane of existence,” but I wasn’t confident. Judging from the ice-related spells from before, though, I could make an educated guess that the effect had to do with space in general.

Maybe it’ll generate a warp portal or something, and I can escape this dungeon, I thought. But I realized that was wishful thinking. Magic that would let me completely invalidate my current situation? Ultimately, as I couldn’t presuppose what the effect would be with any certainty, I opted to refrain from using it just to play it safe. I was afraid that if I didn’t play my cards right, I might even end up producing a black hole or something.

Hmm, might as well see what I can think of for other spells. “Healing magic... white magic... learn magic... new magic... first aid... burns... cure...”

Sadly, I didn’t get a single hit. I wanted a spell to heal myself one way or another, but it looked as though I wasn’t vested with anything like that. A menu of interest did appear amid my string of guesses, however.

【SKILL POINT ALLOCATION】

Swordplay 1.01, Ice Magic 2.00, Dimensional Magic 5.00

You currently have 0 skill points.

Apparently, I had no skill points yet. *They’ll most likely increase along with my level.*

【LEVEL UP】

Requirements met.

As soon as I thought about leveling up, a new display popped up. I had a bad feeling about the words “requirements met,” though. It probably meant that leveling up wasn’t automatic. In fact, there was a distinct possibility that it required some exacting process, like finding a save point.

First things first, I’ve gotta figure out how to level up, and fast.

“If you could, please level me uOWW!”

A sudden heat flared up in my right arm. I looked down to find my upper arm lacerated and bleeding.

“Where’d that come from?!”

I surveyed my surroundings and noticed something moving in the corner of my eye. It was a distortion, a floating warping of space about the size of a basketball, and it was wavering and softly buzzing. Upon closer inspection, the silhouette of that “warp in space” was almost the same as a bug’s.

“A monster?!”

My brain wasted no time switching modes, gamer mode blotting out everyday life mode. My numbed senses were becoming dedicated to a gamer’s efficiency, with a stunt that could only be pulled off here: a place outside the ordinary.

Aiming at the distortion, the midair anomaly, I sliced upward using the blade in my hand, but the anomaly dodged at the last moment. The second I realized it had evaded my swing, I broke into a run, putting some distance between us. I had decided, before going on the move, that if it dodged or withstood my first blow, I would refuse to strain myself too much. I went back down the path I had come through as opposed to an unexplored avenue.

I could hear the thing buzzing after me and calmly used the noise to gauge the distance between us. Directionally speaking, it was right behind me, which was only natural given it was pursuing me. And if that was the case, all that

remained was the timing. I could counterattack using my current resources.

A strategy took shape in my mind. One could perhaps call it futile because we were dealing with game logic, but I deemed it worth a shot.

When the anomaly drew sufficiently close, I pulled the leather bag with water in it out of my inventory and dumped all of its contents behind me. There was a break in the continual buzzing, and its cries pierced the air. It appeared the plan had been a success. I'd guessed that if the creature had wings, chances were good it was weak to water. It would never have worked in a video game, but I guess not everything in this world operated on typical video game logic. Thanks to the water drops hanging on to it, I could begin to make out the creature's contours, and it didn't hurt that it had slowed down as well. After seeing that was the case, I fired off a spell.

"Icespell: *Freeze!*"

While the spell did nothing but lower the temperature, it could be that the anomaly was susceptible to such things. If I could bring it down from afar using my magic, that would be the best-case scenario.

"I won't scream at you to freeze over, but could you at least drop down for me?"

The anomaly's movements had grown visibly stolid. It kept trying to fly my way, but its struggling was in vain, and it couldn't reach me. Employing my option to watch and "*Analyze*," I made sure that nothing could slip my gaze. Letting my guard down before the end was a no-go.

【MONSTER】 Darkling Fly:RANK 2

Analyze prompted the menu to appear, and that was how it described the anomaly before me.

Well that ain't good.

In all likelihood, Mr. Darkling was a monster that counted partial invisibility among its weapons. Nevertheless, my menu-sight pointed its location out to me without impediment. With this, any means by which it could attack me was now

gone. The more time passed, the more sluggishly it moved. I waited until it was well and truly enfeebled to strike it down with my blade.

Having fallen to the ground, the fly monster disappeared in a flash of light, leaving only a dusky yet translucent gem in its wake. Incidentally, said gem was displayed as a 10th-Grade Magic Gem. I also registered an uptick in EXP. The meagerness of both the gem and the EXP gain meant the Darkling Fly was a low-ranking monster.

“Maybe using items and MP on a Rank 2 monster was a waste?”

I had 68 MP left. While the tank wasn’t empty, I didn’t know where it would leave me if I squandered the rest.

I doubled back and proceeded down a corridor I had yet to explore. As I walked, I rechecked the info I had about what had been occupying my attention before that little interruption: leveling up. I tried various things through trial and error, but I couldn’t manage it and remained at Level 1. It appeared I had to fulfill some kind of special condition first. Imagine my sheer irritation, considering experience points were the only thing I had an abundance of.

Then, I thought back on the battle I’d fought moments earlier. A surprise attack from a monster that was hard to visually keep track of. If it had been higher than just Rank 2, it could very well have been curtains for me.

It’s better to experiment with my menu-sight only after securing my safety, I thought. If I get taken by surprise because I stopped heeding my surroundings, it’ll do more harm than good.

That was what was running through my head when I heard noises from afar. A giant insect was lying in wait in the direction I was walking. It was the first monster I’d encountered since arriving here. The giant insect was characterized by its strange twin protuberances.

【MONSTER】 Mandibeetle: RANK 3

Judging by its name, I could guess what its method of attack might be, but it seemed better not to make any moves based on preconceived notions. I

adopted a semi-crouching stance so as to be able to respond no matter what unfolded.

The Mandibeetle had spotted me too. Bit by bit, it cautiously closed the distance. I knew it was Rank 3, but I didn't know how dangerous that made it. Upon drawing close enough, the Mandibeetle suddenly charged, but it was leagues slower than the giant wolf from before. I swung my sword when it flew by me.

“Hyah!”

The sound of metal against metal reverberated, and my sword was repelled. I had perhaps struck the wrong part of it, but I still wouldn't have expected such a heavy blade to be deflected. I'd even tried being cool about it by going “Hyah!” but I was in over my head in more ways than one.

The monster's movements, however, didn't pose much of a problem. It was slower than the wolf, slower even than the Darkling Fly. In order to execute a plan I had thought about in the back of my mind, I pulled a tool out of my inventory.

All the Mandibeetle did was continue charging at me. I continued to dodge well in advance of it hitting me. The first time I'd moved out of its way, I had doused it in oil, and the second time, I'd used my lighter to set it on fire. I had thought it'd take a bunch of tries to ignite it, but I was lucky in that it only took one. The Mandibeetle promptly turned into a fireball, and it began writhing in agony.

“Damn...”

It was a gruesome spectacle. The blazing heat caused the monster's joints to pop out, and its limbs disconnected. It was immobilized immediately, so I poked it with my sword in various places. After a few such stabbings, the Mandibeetle vanished in a burst of light, and a black gem plopped onto the floor. Through my menu-sight, I saw it was labeled a Blackbug Gem. It looked a tad different to me compared to the other magic gems up until that point. I put it in the palm of my hand and used *Analyze* to study it thoroughly.

【BLACKBUG GEM】

Unlike standard magic gems, it's composed of magical energy of the bug element. All bug monsters can drop these.

It... It gave me the item description... It seemed almost too handy. Soon, I was examining all the things I didn't know the details of. First, the items I could equip. It appeared as though items with longer names, on average, such as the Elven Cloak and Blade of Oria, sported special boons. The Elven Cloak warding off damage from the heat and cold, while it looked as though the Blade of Oria exhibited its real value when facing opponents of a higher rank than the wielder. They appeared to be magic items.

Even more conscientiously, the description went so far as to list their attack and defense power. I didn't know how much impact those numbers would bring to bear, but reviewing those kinds of details seemed important.

I then took a look at the magic that I was wondering about the most.

【DIMENSION】

MP consumed: 1

The most basic dimensional spell, or spacespell. In accordance with the caster's caliber, it allows the caster to ascertain the space surrounding them.

Evidently, it was a simple support spell. It would've been awesome if it had been a portal spell I could use to return to my homeworld, but it was nothing that convenient. At any rate, I elected to test it out and see what it entailed.

"Spacespell: *Dimension*," I said.

The moment I spoke the name of the spell, my five senses grew keener, and what one might call a sixth sense expanded to encompass the vicinity. I was now able to clearly perceive everything in a ten-meter radius. Surprisingly, I was even able to pick up info about the blind spot around the corner.

"Wow...this is great." My menu-sight had granted me an array of advantages, but even so, I instantly understood how incredible this dimensional magic was

as well. The power to detect enemies was the most helpful of all. I felt it in my gut—the danger to my life had sunk considerably.

As I gauged the duration of *Dimension*'s effect, I made full use of this weirdly amazing detection field to proceed down the path while evading monster encounters. I walked while picking up the occasional found item and experimenting at times with fresh new systems. There were no surprises while I had *Dimension* active, since I couldn't fail to notice any monsters within its range of effect. I made my way through the Dungeon at many times my previous speed. My expression grew cheerier, my stride lighter.

Dimension was a spell of immense power. But that very fact had the potential to make me let my guard down. I had allowed my obtaining an overwhelmingly expedient spell to buoy my spirits too much, and I was overly confident I was carrying out the best possible course of action, having thought this gamey dungeon through.

It took around thirty minutes of walking for my situation to sour.



It didn't feel particularly hot, but I was sweating all the same. And my breathing was labored too. My arms and legs felt as heavy as lead, and my vision was swimming—all symptoms of the poison status effect.

Around fifteen minutes after I started using *Dimension*, I encountered and fought a Rank 1 monster. I'd been avoiding all monster encounters, but by chance, I ended up spotting a monster that was immobile. If I hadn't been using *Dimension*, I probably wouldn't have cottoned on to the slightly oversized frog that was lying utterly motionless underneath the rubble. It was Rank 1, and I assumed from appearances that it was sleeping. Its name being very straightforward ("Big Frog"), I thought it would get me some EXP without any danger, so I slaughtered it with my sword. It perished in one blow, but its fluids stuck to my body. And since I was battered and bruised, I had cuts and wounds all over me. The frog's fluids entered my body through those wounds, and thus, I got slapped with the poison status effect.

When I saw it in my menu, I turned pale and immediately used the antidote in my inventory, but it didn't remove the poison status. I read the description of

the antidote and realized the graveness of my situation.

【ANTIDOTE】

A typical antidote. Formulated to counter the venom of Poison Bees. Succeeds in curing other poisons 5% of the time.

It appeared there were different types of antidotes. If it was as this item description claimed, I only had a five percent chance of an antidote curing me. Sure enough, I'd failed that RNG roll. I used all of my remaining antidotes, but to no avail.

"I'm out of antidotes... Oh shit, oh *shit!*"

The composure *Dimension* had afforded me was now gone. I was sweating buckets and my health was dropping. I tried using the ice spell to place ice in my mouth and rehydrate, but the game's system didn't register any HP recovery from it.

I couldn't help but check my menu again:

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 17/51

MP: 61/72

CLASS:

LEVEL 1

STR 1.11

VIT 1.03

DEX 1.01

AGI 2.02

INT 4.00

MAG 2.00

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 1.09, Blood Loss 0.21, Poison 1.00

EXP: 805/100

My HP had healed to around 30 before, but now I was down to 17. The poison that was dinging a point from my life once every few minutes was eroding not only my physical body but also my mind through the frantic frustration. I was panting harshly, and my consciousness was getting blurry. If I didn't do something, I'd die.

I searched through the recesses of my brain for a solution. I had a handful of ideas, but the success rate for each of them was low. I weighed my options and settled on a plan. I'd sacrifice my MP and intensify my *Dimension* spell's power.

It was a method whose validity I had fully confirmed when I was hydrating using *Ice*. The same spell could differ in effect depending on how much force and MP were put into it, among other variables.

"Spacespell: *Dimension*!"

My perception field's area of effect swelled to multiple times its original size. The sensation wasn't unlike a bunch of remote-controlled cameras rushing around the corridor. The Dungeon teemed with colorful monsters, but I heeded only whatever might lead to a way to resolve my nasty scrape.

Around when my perception field expanded to fifty times its original size, I discovered an area that was very different. That corridor was well maintained. Its floor was smooth and had a mineral coating applied to it. Lamps were installed at regular intervals. It appeared to be man-made.

I expanded my perception field even more, with that area as the center of focus, and found multiple groups of people walking the paved path. Then, I stopped using *Dimension*—my MP had dwindled into the single digits.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 16/51

MP: 9/72

CLASS:

I gasped for breath and started panting. I'd found people, and they were crossing each other's paths, but there were no fights or friction between them. I thought back to when I'd been attacked. They had said I was in the Dungeon and that I was outside the "Admin Area." That meant the conflict had broken out on the path I'd been walking *because* it was outside the Admin Area, and that conflicts didn't break out on the well-maintained path because it was within the Admin Area. Or rather, I was betting on that possibility.

"I'll make it to that path by using the smallest *Dimension* I can!"

With the direction of the well-maintained path as my only guide, I headed for it. I stopped checking my ever-shrinking HP and just kept walking in search of other people. The antidotes I'd obtained had been taken off dead bodies. It didn't matter if they gave one to me or I took one from them; either way, I needed to cross paths with other people in order to progress.

My eyes were bloodshot, and I mindlessly put one foot in front of the other so as not to lose consciousness. Fortunately, I didn't encounter any monsters, managing to make a beeline for the path. Still, I didn't immediately call out for help. Cautiously, I observed the path, using *Dimension* to examine the people from behind cover. I didn't want to get stabbed the second I called out.

First, I expended more of what little MP I had left and eavesdropped on the closest group (consisting of three males) using *Dimension*. With this, my MP was now at 4.

"...guys, whaddya say we try makin' it to the seventh floor today?"

"Sounds good. We've been on a roll lately. And we'll make a prettier penny if we go that deep."

“I’m down too. I’ve been thinking we oughta widen the range of our Dungeon diving sooner or later...”

The three were casually chatting as they walked down the path. From what they were saying, it was clear they were earning money here in the Dungeon. None of them looked like respectable members of society. Judging by their tough guy appearances, in my world they’d probably have been members of an organization that rhymes with “a booza.” I figured they weren’t the ones I wanted to be talking to. I was hoping, instead, to talk to someone one-on-one. Ideally, someone younger than me, ideally someone female, and ideally someone who looked good-natured. The more of those criteria they met, the better. However, if I held out for too long hoping for perfection, I’d die and defeat the purpose. My HP was still ticking down from the poison.

I decided to use the last of my MP (or rather, since I was too scared to bring it down to 0, I left it at 1) and search for someone who skewed closer than not to those parameters with *Dimension*. I quickly probed a circumference of two hundred meters, and spotted four different groups of people. Or in RPG terms, four *parties*.

The first of these was the group of three tough guys. The second was a mixed-gender party of five in various getups. The third was a group of four outfitted in silver armor. The last was a pair of women. Without hesitation, I settled on approaching those two. They seemed gentle and kind. Maybe they’d help me out if I talked to them. Unfortunately, the mixed-gender group of five and the silver-armored group were closer to me, so I had to remain behind cover and let them go past me.

I waited on bated breath for time to pass, staying hidden until that safest-looking of groups, the two women, appeared. Or rather, that had been my plan.

“Hey, you. You over there, hiding. Show yourself.”

The silver-armored group saw right through me. The mixed-gender group hadn’t seen me, but it appeared the others had spotted me despite being in their blind spot. My heart jumped when he called out to me, but his group *had* been my choice for second best, so I steeled my wits and ran through what I’d say in my head. I left my sword behind cover and cautiously stepped out onto

the path.

“Hmph. Just some brigand, I take it?” said the tall male, as if I were of no concern.

Unlike the other people I’d encountered thus far, the four in silver armor looked well-off. It was the one woman among their number who drew my eye. She looked to be around my age and height. And she was a startler—startlingly pretty, that is. Her lustrous long hair shone like flowing silver, and her features were so perfect, I reckoned no doll could ever replicate them.

Before long, I averted my gaze; she was so uncanny I felt unmoored from reality. I chose to talk to one of the guys instead, zeroing in on the tallest one. He seemed the honest, upstanding sort.

“No, sir, I’m not a brigand. I felt sick, so I needed to rest.”

“If that were the case, you would’ve rested on the Pathway Proper. You’re a bad liar.”

I could sense a tinge of anger in his voice. It seemed this well-maintained path was called the “Pathway Proper” and that it was suited to resting. My excessive caution had backfired; I should have walked on the path after all. Now, I’d slipped up from the jump, and I could sense I was growing pale.

Concluding that lying would be counterproductive, I chose a policy of earnest sincerity. It seemed to me the honest-looking guy was angry that he’d been lied to more than because I’d been hiding, and if he was as he looked, it behooved me to adapt. “I... I have my reasons. Please believe me; I mean you no harm.”

Upon hearing my frantic plea, his expression softened a little. “Hrm. It’d certainly be foolish to try an ambush by yourself, I’ll give you that.”

The other two guys followed suit. “He’s a kid, and alone at that. There’s no problem here.”

“I’d say he’s either lost or he recklessly tackled the Dungeon. He could also be the last of a wiped-out party he was helping by carrying their luggage.”

I sure was glad they were coming up with plausible stories for me. It appeared they weren’t viewing me as a potential threat, as I was battered and on my

own. As much as I could, I waited and watched, not wanting this interaction to balloon out of proportion.

“We mustn’t frighten a child. It would reflect poorly on our chivalry.”

“Shut it, Hine. Right now, we need to be meticulously careful, don’t we? I was just confirming it out of a sense of obligation, that’s all. Real work-minded, aren’t I?” he said, making the tone slightly playful.

At the word “chivalry,” I wondered if they might just fall under the good-natured category. I could infer they were well equipped to handle anything from their affluent-looking outfits as well. This was perhaps the right time to go for it.

I steeled my resolve—I was going to consult them about the poison.

“Well... Well, you see, I—”

But I was cut off by a girl’s voice: “You’re an intriguing one!”



Before I knew it, that startingly pretty girl was standing right beside me, peering at me with her fantastical golden eyes. They were so gorgeous they were scary, shaving away at many a thing within me.

The guys, taken aback by her sudden accosting of me, called out to her.

“Err, uhh, milady, do you have some business with him?”

“Ah, apologies. It’s a trivial matter,” she replied, getting even closer.

I wanted to scream, to yell at her to stay back. But the words wouldn’t come out of my parched throat.

“Wait, hold on!” shouted one of the guys. “Please refrain from interacting with other divers!”

“Surely a brief chat won’t hurt anyone. You won’t let me get involved with anything else, so please, let me at least have a little talk with this here diver, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Yes, milady, but...”

I guess something she said must have persuaded them, as their objections ended there. The girl who had silenced the three guys drew so close that our faces threatened to touch.

“You really are quite intriguing,” she whispered so that only I could hear. “Honestly, you’re so interesting that I’m green with envy. Truly, I mean. I’m really jealous,” she continued.

Only I could hear those murmured remarks. Her soft, clear voice sent a chill up my spine. She furrowed her beautiful brow, her covetous expression driving home the fact that she did indeed envy me. The angle was such that only I could see her face. Consequently, the three guys just stood by and watched.

“Must be nice. No, really, must be nice. It must be sooo nice...” she muttered.

I wondered if she was putting a curse on me or something. All I could do was endure as her comely lips kept on murmuring what I might call a hex.

“What’s the matter, milady?” asked one of the guys, impatient. “I know...you saw something with those eyes of yours, didn’t you?”

At that, her expression instantly shifted. Her mad envy disappeared, replaced by a doll-like blankness. Then she put on a smile and looked back at her entourage. “Yes, something like that,” she said innocently, as though that muttered malediction-of-sorts had never happened.

“Is that so? Does the boy possess some intriguing skill, then?”

“No, that’s not it. It seems our friend is poisoned, and his stamina’s running low. So I thought I’d heal him.”

“Wha?” I blurted out. I had *not* been expecting *that*. As if suddenly basking in the sun, blood started flowing through my ice-cold body.

“Ah, I see. So that’s all there is to it.”

“Now, allow this kindhearted lady to cure what ails you!” she said, facing me again and starting her incantation: “Sing thou to the soothing light of day. To illusion the waters cascade, the blood ne’er to return. Shroud thou heaven and earth...”

Soft, pure-white light spilled from her hands and enveloped my body. The pain and fatigue that was racking me subsided, and my body started feeling light again, as if none of my misadventures up until now had actually transpired. I couldn’t do anything but watch her magic take effect. As long as the spell she was casting on me was healing magic, I had no reason to resist.

“*Full Cure!* Ta-da. You’re good to go.” She stopped emitting her healing light and flashed me a grin in which I detected no hint of envy. She then gave me an even more intense once-over. “Looky here. Hmm... Huh. Wow. So ‘confusion’ isn’t a bad status effect, then. You really are intriguing. Oh, but the burn will leave a scar. Treatment came too late for that.” She nodded admiringly.

She’d mentioned my “confusion” status. I checked my menu.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 51/51

MP: 1/72

CLASS:

LEVEL 1

STR 1.11

VIT 1.03

DEX 1.01

AGI 2.02

INT 4.00

MAG 2.00

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 1.00

The “blood loss” and “poison” conditions were gone, leaving only “confusion.” Could she, too, see menus? Maybe it wasn’t the same as my power, but at the very least, she could sense my “confusion” condition in some way.

She chuckled and spoke so only I could hear, with a glib buddy-buddy tone that stuck to me. “I’ll be seeing you, Aikawa Kanami. Oh, and my name’s Lastiara. Don’t forget.”

“Did something happen, milady?” The guys drew closer once they saw the healing magic had been completed.

“No, nothing. Hnn, it sure feels good to give a helping hand! Now, let’s be on our way! Off to the depths. No time to waste!”

The girl named Lastiara had reverted to the more polite register of speech and walked away as if to tell me she had nothing else to say to me.

“Uh,” I said on the spur of the moment, “thank you so much.”

She smiled like a predator with its eyes on its prey. “It’s quite all right. I’ll have you return the favor sooner or later.” Needless to say, her grin was angled such that only I could see it.

“See ya, lad. Be careful out there.”

“I advise that you head straight home!”

“Indeed.”

The guys smiled as they offered their warnings. I didn't sense any of Lastiara's battiness in them. Their smiles were born of the sense of security and achievement they got from rescuing the weak.

I aimed to part ways with *her* as quickly as possible, though. “Understood. Thank you for helping me. I'll be going now.”

I proceeded in the opposite direction from them on the well-maintained path—the “Pathway Proper.” The guys waved goodbye, suspecting nothing. In all likelihood, the way I was going was the way out, which I wanted. I forced a smile and walked away from the silver-armored group. Or more accurately, I ran away from the girl named Lastiara.

Even as I parted ways with her, she was staring fixedly at me. The chill that crept down my spine wouldn't disappear, even after leaving her.

As I distanced myself from them at a quick pace, I thought to myself that if I were to focus only on the end result of our meeting, I'd have to conclude that they were a group of good-natured people. Since my first encounter with other people here had led to a leg wound and my being used as a decoy, that was where my mind tended to go. But mostly due to that Lastiara girl, an uneasiness I couldn't put into words remained within me.

I decided to do as the good-natured group had told me and walked boldly down the Pathway Proper. I soon passed by the pair of women, but they didn't have anything to say to me. I considered asking them if I was indeed walking away from the Dungeon, but I ended up not doing so. I could see for myself the way foot traffic was flowing.

I passed by a variety of groups on the way. Some people sized me up, but nothing of particular note happened. After walking for under an hour, I finally reached the exit.

“Yes! I *did* it!”

The light of the sun burned my eyes. The gentle breeze felt pleasantly warm, and the clear air's fragrance blew the Dungeon's bouquet of smells out of the water. With that, I could truly believe I'd made it above ground. I expressed my jubilation through my whole body.

Then, a man who looked in fine form called out to me. "Whoa there, bud. Dramatic much?" He was smiling. He looked friendly, but I turned stiff when I noticed the deathbringer—the sword sheathed at his waist.

I didn't sense any hostility from him, though. Seeing as he was standing at attention in front of the exit, it was very likely he was a guard or sentinel. His attire was formal and wouldn't be out of place on someone in security.

I put a damper on that train of thought and reined in my mirth. Then I spoke gently to him. "Well, I've been through a lot today." I chose my words so as not to ruffle any feathers and waited to see how that landed.

"Heh, well, you do look pretty beat up, kid. You made it right before the hour the water supply's cut off, so you can still use it." He pointed with his thumb at a faraway point.

"Thank you very much. I'll be back." I bowed, inwardly jumping with joy at the words "water supply."

"It's my job. No need to thank me!"

I started walking in the direction he had pointed.

The man had said that conversation was his job. I didn't know whether it was public work or something, but chances were good people in that profession would come in handy for me.

I walked for a few moments and soon I found the well. I was disappointed—it wasn't like the modern well I'd been picturing. Yet there was no denying it would help me out. It worked via the same mechanism the wells in my world did, so it didn't take much time or effort to draw the water. I filled up the leather bag inside my inventory with it, then washed my clothes. By wiping the mud off with a wet cloth, I got decently clean in my eyes. I wasn't sure whether I ought to wash my blade, but the smell was distracting, so I rinsed it anyway.

As I did my washing, I thought about the man from before. There wasn't

much pedestrian traffic to speak of, so the danger of being overheard was probably low. Judging by both his looks and character, he wasn't a bad person. If I wanted to quickly come by information, he'd be useful for sure.

After running simulations of our conversation beforehand, I approached him, acting casual. "Phew, I'm feeling a bit better now. You were a huge help!"

"Yep. Here in the north's the only place with water service at the entrance to the Dungeon. Good ol' Whoseyards."

"Wow, really? Other places don't have it?"

"Yeah, it's a country of knights and all. Must be 'cause it's got the most money outta all five of the countries by the Dungeon."

Man, you can't be throwing words like that at me like it's normal.

To be frank, I wanted to talk to him about modern times. Which is to say, about the world that was formerly home. But I now knew this to be a world of swords and sorcery. The likelihood of him understanding me was slim. He'd probably just think me suspicious. This wasn't yet the stage where I could risk it all.

I decided to pretend to know what he was talking about and extract more information. "Does Whoseyards use all that money in other ways too?"

"Oh yeah. It's got tons of facilities built expressly for the Dungeon. What, kid, is this your first time in the country?"

"Yes, it's my first time."

"Makes sense. Traveling between the five nations is easier these days."

"If there's a place I can learn all about this country, could you tell me about it?"

"Well, you probably wanna walk a straight line from here and get to the central plaza. There's a signboard there. Then, you oughta go to the National Library or the brokerage office and look stuff up. Once you're used to the place, you should probably hit up guilds and churches and the like too."

"I see. Thank you very much." I bowed my head deeply in gratitude.

“It’s fine. It’s my job,” he said, sheepishly scratching his cheek. “Real men don’t demand thanks.”

It didn’t seem as though I could stretch this conversation out any further. Maybe I’d get another chance to speak with this man who had so graciously helped me. I chose to leave before he decided something was fishy.

“See you.”

“Yep, see ya.”

I waved goodbye and headed straight for the central plaza. After walking some distance, I looked behind me and saw the full picture of the Dungeon. It was, in truth, a colossal and wondrously strange ruin. At its center stood an enormous tree that pierced the heavens, a worn down structure stuck to its base. Uncannily, the giant tree’s boughs were decorated with clouded gems, looking like a rainbow of flowers from afar. Said ornaments were so massive that they were warped in shape. Maybe those unnatural-looking decorations housed spaces inside them, and those spaces were also part of the Dungeon.

Before the sight of an entity that could only exist in flights of fancy, I stood there, overwhelmed. It felt like the gargantuan Dungeon had a mind and a will of its own, and it was peering down on me. That was how stately it felt. The pressure was intense.

At the same time, I felt a curious affinity for it. It was an odd sense of foreboding, like I’d known this Dungeon for ages and that it would obviously be part of my life going forward.

I shook my head and cleared it of that sensation. Turning my back on the ruin, I walked forward, because it felt like if I didn’t, the Dungeon would swallow me up anew. I paced quickly away, all the while relishing the joy of escaping.

I’d never seen this world before, but I didn’t get lost. The roads were surprisingly well-ordered. One would never have expected them to be so lovely and perfectly planned, given the archaic attire the people were wearing. The edges of the roads were lined with an alluring mineral that seemed to be some kind of precious gemstone. The same was true for the Pathway Proper; the gemstone lines just stretched on and on without interruption. Perhaps in this world, gems and jewels weren’t considered particularly precious or valuable.

I kept walking down that fantastical road, and eventually rows of buildings came into view. They were diverse, some made of brick, others of wood, still others of different materials. The scenery looked more or less identical to what you'd find in your traditional RPG town. The culture skewed Western, and the time period felt medieval for the most part. The people walking around town seemed lively and spirited, and they too were diverse. There were those who wore nothing but a cloth like a smock, and those who clinked and clanked down the street in heavy steel armor. Public spaces were chock-full of people of all skin colors, and I even spotted the occasional animal-person—half-human hybrids, so to speak. There were those with sharp fangs bared, those with long ears, those with fluffy tails or beautiful feathers... The city was a melting pot of fairy-tale races.

It felt like common sense and pure lunacy were being noisily ground into a pulpy melange. And I could hear the scraping sound of something important to me eroding away. There were so many people, but I felt utterly alone. There was so much space, but I was assailed by a siege mentality. The sense of isolation was crushing. The despair felt like when I had gotten lost in the department store when I was a little kid—the feeling the world was ending.

Without a doubt, this was not a world I had ever been in. The spectacle before my eyes seared that merciless truth into me. I grew dizzy, the sensation throwing off my balance. My legs gave out. Although I didn't want to admit it, I couldn't deny the reality in front of me. For indeed, the frightening truth was that this place was surely...

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

“Ah...”

That notification again. I watched it come and go, my state of mind calm and quiet. My symptoms were just as described: in exchange for my fretfulness and

unease, I had obtained a clear head. I had my misgivings regarding the ??? skill, but I concluded it was saving my neck at the moment. Without this composure, I might be in the stomach of a giant wolf right now.

Once again, I surveyed my surroundings. There wasn't a single person I recognized or a single building I was familiar with. This fantasy world was vivid, realistic, and far too huge. The grand vista was right out of a picture book and underscored the fact it wasn't my world. This wasn't some practical joke or an attraction in a foreign country or an underdeveloped area on Earth. That sort of wishful thinking was rapidly deteriorating.

Argh, but it's no use.

What was more important to focus on now was "if that's how it is, then what do I do?" If I just stood there stupefied, I'd gain nothing, so I assembled a short-term plan of action in my head.

"First things first: the signboard."

I slapped my cheeks to psych myself up, then walked the streets with an expression I hoped said, "I'm supposed to be here." Thankfully, my outfit didn't make me stand out. There were plenty of adventurers in town sporting swords and cloaks.

After a few minutes, I found the central square. It was around as big as a dome stadium, with fountains, stone benches, and more. A large signboard stood in the center, but no one was looking at it. In fact, there was nary a soul in the square. It could be this area of land was maintained for official events, and it was treated as just another street the rest of the time.

A number of giant maps were displayed on the signboard, and the nation's history was written there as well. Beside it stood an impressive statue. Maybe it was something akin to a commemorative monument for the country. I drank in the contents of the signboard, hoping to absorb it all. According to it, this whole country was *for* the Dungeon. To be exact, it was a member of an alliance of five nations that believed in the same religion and followed its teachings. They surrounded the enormous Dungeon, and they were trying to "win" it. Religious tradition said that by overcoming the Dungeon's trials and reaching the hundredth and final floor, one could grant any wish they desired.

It was a win condition. It seemed almost tailor-made for my predicament. I guess the world was telling me to make it down to the hundredth floor if I wanted to get back.

I continued reading. The country I was in, called “Whoseyards,” was situated north of the Dungeon. An aristocratic society at its core, the people of this nation prized chivalry, considering their ancestors to be knights of renown.

One of the maps pinpointed where exactly in Whoseyards I was. The state was split into one hundred separate domains, each with a number assigned to it. The custom was that the smaller the number, the higher the class of the people living there. I’d found myself in #21. If I were to move toward #22, I’d find the shopping district, and if I returned to #20, I’d find public bodies such as the brokerage office. I referred to that info and headed toward #20, where there was a library.

The library was built where it could stand out as a symbol of the neighborhood, so I didn’t get lost on my way there. I concealed my anxiety and entered the building. The attendant looked me over for a second but didn’t stop me.

Architecturally, it was a spacious Western-style building made of wood. It was very quiet, and didn’t seem any different from the libraries I knew. I picked out some books I thought might come in handy and sat down at one of the available tables. I spread out the books before me, but I had to question the idea of actually reading them. More precisely, a thought that I’d been turning away from until now bubbled up to the surface.

“Why am I able to read these moonrunes, anyway?” I muttered to myself.

In response, people who’d been reading quietly looked up at me.

“Sorry,” I said under my breath, bowing my head in apology.

They lost interest and turned their attention back to their own texts. Honestly, it was weird that my apology actually registered with them. Among the people who’d looked my way were a blond white person and someone with fleecy animal ears. It was a safe bet these people weren’t studying Japanese or anything. How had they understood what I’d said?

Then there was the book I'd cracked open. Upon closer inspection, it was filled with bizarre letters that were neither English nor Japanese. Yet I'd deemed it ideal for learning more about this world and picked it up for that reason. My Japanese was being translated into a strange tongue, and that strange tongue was being translated into Japanese for me. The words I spoke substituted for my convenience.

I could perhaps just chalk it up to magic. But if I'd tried such a thing in my world, I'd have needed some sort of brain surgery first. My brain would be tampered with, my memories and personality added to and subtracted from.

Damn, that's... That's way too scary to think about...

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

Urgh... Not again...

My muddy maelstrom of fear vanished into thin air, and I regained my composure. While I certainly had the ??? skill to thank for saving me, I also had a bad feeling about it. I understood its trigger condition hinged on my mental state. I had to tamp down on my thought patterns and keep myself from being ruled by strong emotions. I took a deep breath and became *calm*.

I know. It was, of course, not your normal everyday calm. It was an abnormal calm. In fact, it was possible this calm wasn't even a good thing. Maybe it was something else entirely. My apprehension remained, but for the time being, I had no choice but to rely on it.

I couldn't stop my confusion condition from increasing. One look at my menu made that abundantly clear:

【STATS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 51/51

MP: 1/72

CLASS:

LEVEL 1

STR 1.11

VIT 1.03

DEX 1.01

AGI 2.02

INT 4.00

MAG 2.00

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 3.00

But belying my supposed “confusion,” my head was perfectly clear. Perhaps the ??? skill actively negated it. But the fact that my confusion condition was not only still there but had gotten up to 3.00 scared me. That one string of text stirred my anxiety.

It was very worrying, but thinking about it any more than I already had would get me nowhere. All I could do now was hit the books and move forward. Learning more about this world, this country, this culture, and the Dungeon would get me closer to a solution. And so, for as long as I could, I immersed myself in the realm of print.

Chapter 2: The Dungeon Alliance

I spent a few hours poring over the books and gathered quite a bit. Tomes touching on history told me the basics, and through some specialized treatises and more modern texts, I was able to get a general handle on people's occupations and everyday livelihoods. Best of all, this was a library not far from the Dungeon, and the wealth of information it possessed on explorers and adventurers, and even the Dungeon itself, was massively helpful.

Around sundown, I stopped reading and listened to the various things the staff were saying. While I'd been reading, people had asked the staff for directions from time to time, so I mimicked them and succeeded in accruing more info without arousing suspicion.

Upon exiting the library, I followed the directions I was given and found my way to an establishment called a money changer's store. I surreptitiously took my leather bag out of my inventory, only entering the store after slinging it around my waist. I couldn't find any information on menu-sight or inventories at the library, so chances were high that only I had those abilities, which is why I thought it best to keep my powers hidden.

The inside of the money changer's store resembled what in my world was called an antique shop. Old items and junk littered the interior.

I called out to a plump man who could only be the proprietor. "Excuse me. I don't have much, but could you please give me some money for it?" I asked, starting our negotiations politely. At first, I thought I ought to haggle aggressively so I wouldn't be taken for a ride, but I changed my mind. After all, while getting money was one of my objectives, I wanted more information too, if at all possible. So I took the less risky course of action.

"Yep, sure thing. Show me what you've got," he said, eager to do business.

"Okay, sir."

【ITEMS】

Jerky, Water Pack, Styptic, Oil, Stun Needle, Rasp, Blade of Oria, Leather Gloves, Leather Shoes, Cloth Garb, Wooden Bow, Steel Knife, Unbranded Arrow, Lighter, Smartphone, Pebble, Twig, 10th-Grade Magic Gem, 9th-Grade Magic Gem

I pretended to pull the items out from my leather bag as opposed to midair, placing all of my 10th-Grade magic gems on the counter.

“Ah, magic gems from the upper floors, eh? That’ll be a flat rate of a copper coin per.”

“Got it. I’ll take them; thank you,” I replied immediately, partly because I didn’t really feel like haggling to begin with and because a flat rate didn’t sound so bad.

“There ya go. Twelve pieces o’ copper. Got a certificate?”

A pause. “No, sir.”

“Then put your finger on that and print your print.”

He caught me off guard with the certificate comment, but it seemed it wasn’t mandatory. *When in the history of Earth did they start using fingerprints?*

“Hit the Dungeon without a certificate, huh? You a foreigner?” he asked with an air of suspicion. He perhaps regarded my awkward manner as questionable.

I responded as confidently as I could. “I am. I heard the rumors about the Dungeon and traveled here from a faraway nation.”

“And you got this much on your first run? Not bad, kid. Where ya from?”

Apparently, I’d done pretty well for myself on my “first run.” Not that I felt very proud—the vast majority of my loot was taken from dead bodies. But seeing as this conversation was going well, I decided to continue going with the flow. I picked a safe option from among the countries I had learned about in the library. My story would be that I hailed from a distant land, and an obscure, unimportant one at that. If I recalled correctly, there was just such a country by the name of Fania.

“It’s very far away. Have you heard of a country named Fania?”

“Fania, huh? Dunno much about Fania, but I know where it is on the map. Ya made quite the trek, didn’t ya? What’s it like over there?”

I figured he must have had time on his hands because he wasn’t letting the matter drop. “There’s not really much of anything there. By the way, sir, do you have any recommendations for a place to stay the night?”

“Hmm, a place to stay? Whoseyards has public inns, but they’ll cost ya. In fact, there ain’t no place in Whoseyards that’s cheap!”

“Is that so?” Evidently, Whoseyards was fairly expensive as countries go. I’d gotten an inkling of that from what those armed guards by the entrance of the Dungeon were saying.

“From the looks of it, you picked one of the countries more or less at random,” he commented. “Whoseyards is the nicest-looking outta the lot, so folks who don’t know much about Alliance countries tend to come here first. It’s a safe and prosperous nation, but everything’s pricey as a result. They call it a knightly aristocracy for a reason, ya know.”

“I see...”

It was pure chance that I’d happened to find myself in Whoseyards. *Looks like the country’s got glaringly obvious pros and cons. Guess it’s a country for the rich, by the rich.*

“I’ll be blunt: if ya ain’t got deep pockets, exploring the Dungeon with Whoseyards as your base’ll be rough going. Those pieces o’ copper ya earned yourself ain’t gonna buy ya enough to fill your stomach either. If ya ain’t a high-level, high-income Dungeon diver, ya can’t even really find room or board here.”

“It’s that pricey, huh? So, around what percent more does a room cost here than in other countries?”

“What percent more? You’re thinking small. How many *times* more expensive, more like. No matter where ya go in Whoseyards, it’ll cost ya a few hundred copper coins, easy.”

“A... A few *hundred*?!”

“We got people just strolling around with gold coins on ‘em. Sorry to say it, but if ya got no money, you’d best camp outdoors someplace without a ley line. Ya can head east for Vart as early as tomorrow if you like. That country’s a mite on the unsafe side, but it’s great for Dungeon exploration. I’m pretty sure they’ve got places ya can stay for a few pieces o’ copper.”

I wanted to at least avoid sleeping outdoors. I was drained enough as it was, and I didn’t honestly know if I could absorb any more stress. It would fulfill the conditions for that “???” skill to activate on me again for sure, and I had a bad feeling that wasn’t something I could let happen over and over without any consequences.

There was another solid reason to avoid sleeping outside: the fact that I still didn’t really grasp what ley lines were about. From what this shopkeeper was implying, if I ended up sleeping outside, I’d be forced to keep far enough away from them. All I could find on the subject back at the library was that ley lines “are lines composed of magic gem material that transmit magical energy.”

So, to sum up, I couldn’t afford to be stingy with my items. I had to raise money today, and lots of it. I took a risk and decided to count on the better nature of the man who was humoring a beginner like me.

“Err, uhh, if that’s the case, could I ask you to look at everything I have on me? I’d like to know how much it’ll all go for...”

“Hrm, so you’ve got more. Sure, show me everything you’ve got.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I exited the shop and took out stuff like the Blade of Oria from my inventory before going back in. I told him I’d left the thing with an acquaintance, but he obviously found that dodgy, though he left it at that. *Maybe a spell or item similar in function to my inventory ability also exists in this world*, I thought.

Except for a minimum baseline of items, I sold everything I thought could be sold. My resulting inventory:

【ITEMS】

Levahn Silver Coins, Levahn Copper Coins, Steel Knife, Jerky, Water Pack, Styptic, Oil, Lighter, Smartphone, Pebble, Twig

I'd obtained ten pieces of silver, each one worth a hundred copper coins. The named equipment and the giant wolf's magic gem alone got me nine of them.

"Thank you very much, sir. You've been a huge help."

"Oh, don't mention it. Ya had excellent loot, so you're helping me out too. Now then, be careful out there, newbie."

And with that, I left the money changer's store. My inventory wasn't as bountiful anymore, but now my prospects of landing a place to stay the night in Whoseyards was looking brighter. I made my way to the cheapest lodging (according to the storekeeper), after which I carried out the procedure for a night's accommodation. My stay came with dinner and breakfast, so I headed for the dining room.

To be honest, the food tasted gross. Compared to Earth, it left a lot to be desired. Here, there was nothing as nice and comforting as rice. Ground grains, tubers, and stale bread were mainly what was on offer.

After I finished eating dinner, I entered my room for the night. It was a modest space, and by my standards, it couldn't be called clean or hygienic, but from what I'd heard, in this world it belonged to a relatively high tier of quality. That fact hit me with a bit of vertigo. I took deep breaths to keep nice and calm.

"*Phew... I'm beat.*"

I flopped onto my hard bed. It was my first time resting all day. My mind unwound, and I found my thoughts wandering back toward normalcy. Thinking about things from a normal perspective, everything that had happened that day was strange and ridiculous. My doubts and questions were beyond counting. And once such doubts pop up, you can never regain your composure until you find an answer.

What the hell's even happening? I began to search for the answer in my head, which was a waste of time—I was just wondering to myself. *Arrgh, what am I*

even doing?

I wake up in a dungeon and get attacked by monsters in some magic RPG world. I get belittled, I lose tons of blood, and I damn near bite it. I even looted corpses like some grave robber. I don't see how this could make sense, and I don't understand a lick of this. What is this world? Where's my world? My family? My parents might not be around, but I've still got my sister. Have I disappeared from my world? Is she all alone at home right now? God, I hope not! Even just that, I can't let it happen! I've gotta return home; I don't care how. I need to wake up early and make her breakfast. I gotta escape this dumb fantasy world, and fast! Menus? Magic? Stats? A game system that responds to my inner thoughts? Just how much must my brain have been tampered with to get that to work? I'm scared. This is too much! What's enjoyable as fantasy sucks as reality. Is this some sick joke?! What does this place want from me?! Screw this! I'm so pissed! Argghh! ARRRRGGHH!

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

The familiar words in the notification box. The firestorm in my head was instantly doused. I'd gone and done it again. But I was used to it by now. I couldn't help it if the skill activated on me.

Let's just keep absorbing whatever info I can, nice and calm, and come up with a strategy going forward. I've gotta make the best of the hand I've been dealt. Do the best I can, over and over again. That's all I can do for now. And right now, taking the time to let my body rest is crucial. Nothing good will come of me dropping dead of exhaustion.

I let my dead-tired brain rest and slept like a log, sinking into a deep and muddy slumber. I was in absolutely no place to be dreaming, simply engulfed by a black, worrisome darkness. A pitch-black world without end.

Hours and hours passed, but to me, it felt like a few seconds. That was the

sort of sleep I plunged into.



Unfortunately, this world wouldn't give me time to rest so easily.

"Wakey, wakey!"

All the air in my lungs expelled, my abdomen was squashed. I snapped painfully awake.

"C'mon, get up!" came a voice. "Quickly! Oh, do wake up!"

The voice was shrill but clear and young. I'd heard it before.

"Hngh, urgh. Wait, I... You're that..." I opened my eyes and recognized the source of the voice. There she was—the symbol of the can't-be-real.

"I got you something you'll love, so get up already!"

It was Lastiara, the creepy girl I'd encountered back in the Dungeon. She was no longer in the armor I'd seen her in before but rather in casual clothes of white silk. She appeared to be pressing down on my stomach, sitting astride me and looking down.

It was all so sudden that my mind was having trouble catching up, but I was able to calmly converse with her—I guess because my mind was already having trouble comprehending much of anything.

"This is my room, you know," I replied, taking her to task for her intrusion to see if that got me anywhere. Not that I was certain this world had a law against trespassing.

I examined my surroundings and found it was still dark outside the window. It seemed this was a late-night visit.

Lastiara got off of me even as she clapped her hands and commended me. "Wow! I'm impressed. You're so unfazed!"

"I'm not unfazed; it just hasn't sunk in yet," I said, my tone polite. I didn't know her true nature, for one, but there was also the fact that I surmised she was from the upper class when I met her in the Dungeon.

"Ah. Well, I saw you were in a bit of a bind, so I thought I'd drop by! I mean,

you haven't even gotten past Level 1 yet, and it's been bothering me something fierce," she said gleefully.

The polite rich-girl manner of speech she'd used back at the Dungeon was gone now, replaced by the sort of carefree bantering tone you'd expect from friends of the same age. But I wasn't up to replying in the same free and easy way. The amusement in her eyes was terrifying. I couldn't tell whether those eyes were focused on something or not, and that made me supremely uneasy.

I chose my words carefully. "You can see other people's levels, can't you?"

In this world, the concept of levels was known by all. The books I read in the library had mentioned levels, stats, and conditions in many places. I'd also read that only a chosen few could see details about someone's level and the like.

"Yep! Over in this world, there are a few of us who're fortunate enough to have that ability! I suppose the devout can gain it if they train long and hard too. Like the priests in charge of leveling up in churches and other public institutions. I'm a natural, though!"

There she went, freely explaining what I wanted to know like it was nothing. She clearly took it for granted that I was unfamiliar with this world, not to mention her saying "over in this world." I gulped, taken aback. "I didn't know that. Thank you very much. But I have no idea what you want, and I don't know who or what you are, so I have half a mind to call someone to chase you out."

"Wait, hold on!" she said, panicking, her hands flying up. "That'd be quite bad for me. I came here to *help* you! I'm here out of the goodness of my heart; I'll help you absorb those experience points you've got piled up!"

"I'll pass," I declined coldly. "I learned about leveling up at the library, and I know where the church is." I didn't want an unknown quantity like her doing anything like that to me, because to me, leveling up was an extremely important affair.

She dropped her shoulders. "What? But...huh?"

"Please, go away."

"I don't get it," she muttered, visibly sulky and crestfallen. "Normally, someone would be more, like...*you know*. But you're barely even reacting. I

swear...”

Apparently, my response wasn't what she'd been expecting. Undaunted, I urged her to leave, and then she looked into my face with the expression one gets when they've resolved to do something.

“All right, I'll just do it by force, then!”

Her smile was her brightest one all day. Her eyes bored holes in me. My first impression of her hadn't changed a whit—her golden eyes inspired nothing but fear and awe in me. I was scared. In my mind, she was just a monster in human skin. No matter how much her beautiful face emoted, I sensed no human warmth in her eyes. They were cold, like she was a god handing down some pitiless pronouncement. Paralyzed with terror though I was, I leaped off the bed and away from her.

At that, Lastiara chanted an incantation, waving her hands like a conductor as she wove her spell. “Crate that loathes. Soundless skies, subpar singing. Untangled locks—”

As fast as I could, I bolted for the door, attempting to leave the room and get help from a third party. I put my hand on the doorknob and...nothing. It didn't even budge. It was unnaturally stiff, as if made so by magic, and it was radiating a pale purple light. That was when I realized her incantation meant to trap me inside.

Out of options, I pounded the door and shouted, “Someone! Somebody help me!”

“I soundproofed it, so it's not a big deal, but could you just be good and sit still for me?”

Before I knew it, Lastiara had drawn close behind me and was caressing my throat. I immediately brushed aside her hand, but my throat started emitting a pale purple light all the same. She'd cast the same spell on my throat as she had on the doorknob before. I tried speaking, but no sound came out. My vocal cords refused to vibrate. Seeing that her magic had muted me, she reached for me again with the same hand. I steeled my resolve and grabbed her by the wrist, intending to twist it behind her back. At that very moment, I found myself hurled into the air. I could see the top of Lastiara's head from under my nose. It

was then I understood—she'd used her free hand to grab the hand of mine that was holding her wrist and tossed me away. Her muscle strength was beyond what a girl who must have weighed under fifty kilograms could reasonably muster.

With the gears in my rapidly cooling head turning, I focused on landing safely, which was made possible by my anything-could-happen attitude going in. I nearly hit the ceiling before slamming down to the ground. Luckily, though I landed on my legs and right hand, the shock was distributed throughout my body. Even as I grimaced from the impact, Lastiara was already there again, right before my eyes.

I took a knife out of my inventory and held it at the ready. She looked a tiny bit surprised at that, but then she smiled wryly and reached out again as though my knife meant nothing.

I couldn't move. My conscience was putting the brakes on the idea of cutting a girl with a knife. I was fully aware that I was being too soft, having come this far, but I pretended to slash at her while taking out the water pack from my inventory with my free hand, blocking her vision so that I could make my escape.

Lastiara must have seen my counterattack coming, because she slapped the water pack away and disarmed me with alarming speed before sweeping my legs out from under me. Then, with my head pinned, she intoned a spell. A pale purple light radiated through my mind, and my whole body froze, unable to move an inch.

"Hm, I must say, your judgment and ability to land on your feet are incredible. I almost can't believe you're only Level 1."

I was no match for her, but it seemed she was impressed with me. She seemed truly surprised. "Maybe this is that 'numbers beyond one's numbers' thing. For real, though, you're something else. Your *strength* and *agility* are a tenth of my own, yet you somehow took that hit like a champ! And it takes a super long time for magic to work its way through you too. You've got scary potential."

I couldn't say a thing in response. With my body immobilized, I couldn't hurl a

single choice word her way. I couldn't help but feel anxious about the helpless state I found myself in.

"Oh, stop worrying so much. Believe it or not, I mean you no harm. All I'm doing is leveling you up. Really," she said as she got on my back and whipped out an old-looking book from her person.

"Let's see here. The incantation for leveling up... *Prithee take heed, and introspect...*"

From our bodies spilled white light, and the room was soon filled with it.

"...it be mine, it be thine. Aaaand that's a wrap."

And with that, the spell was over. If Lastiara was telling the truth, then my level had just increased.

"You're my all-important candidate, so I can't have you roaming around at a stupid low level like that. If your stats stay that low, a stiff breeze could take you out! You had me on pins and needles, you know. But now, with this, I can breathe a sigh of relief."

As if to say, "Here's to a hard day's work," she wiped nonexistent sweat from her brow, approached the window, and gave me her parting words in a tone of feigned politeness. "Right then, a frightening bunch are losing their minds looking for me, so kindly allow me to take my leave. I bid you goodbye."

With that, she leaped out the window. Meanwhile, my body was still paralyzed. I watched the whirlwind of a girl leave and checked my stats.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 119/121

MP: 71/141

CLASS:

LEVEL 4

STR 3.03

VIT 3.15

DEX 4.07

AGI 5.05

INT 6.09

MAG 8.08

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 3.99

EXP: 127/800

Obtained 3 bonus points.

Obtained 3 skill points.

It was true—my level had gone up. It seemed this “Lastiara” girl had no ill will toward me after all. Yet she’d also refused to take no for an answer. She definitely remained someone I couldn’t afford to let my guard down around.

I turned it all over in my head as I lay on the cold floor. Or rather, I couldn’t do anything else, as my body was immobile. I experimented with the “bonus points” and “skill points” that my menu now said I had. Apparently, bonus points were for adding to stats (such as strength and vitality), while skill points could be used to build up my skills.

I didn’t want to bite the big one anytime soon, so I put all my bonus points into increasing my HP. If I were playing an RPG, I’d spare some thought for efficiency and sprinkle some points into strength and what have you, but in this case, I prioritized HP, as in this world, I couldn’t afford to ever die. Each bonus point counted for 10 additional HP, so now my max HP stood at 151.

I put a single skill point into dimensional magic, and after doing so, the text display changed to “5.05+0.10.” I used *Dimension* to see how it had changed and found only the slightest of buffs to it, so I saved the two remaining skill points for later. I knew that my stats, current status, magic, and the like would be a major part of my everyday life here, and I couldn’t discount the possibility that I would obtain new spells down the line. Wasting my points was to be

avoided.

I was satisfied with my new policy regarding how to use the points I earned. Time passed, but I still couldn't move at all. At the end of the day, I'd spent a small fortune only to wind up sleeping on a cold, hard floor. Thus did my first day in this world come to a close.



【STATUS】

NAME: AIKAWA Kanami

HP 151/151

MP 141/141

CLASS:

LEVEL 4

STR 3.03

VIT 3.15

DEX 4.07

AGI 5.05

INT 6.09

MAG 8.08

APT 7.00

CONDITION: CONFUSION 4.29

EXP: 127/800

【SKILLS】

Innate Skills: Swordplay 1.01, Ice Magic 2.02

Acquired Skills: Dimensional Magic 5.05+0.10

???:???

???:???

【MAGIC】

Ice Magic: Freeze 1.00 Ice 1.01

Dimensional Magic: Dimension 1.01



When I woke up the next day, I found I was able to move my body again. I was inwardly worried I would still be unable to move, so I was relieved for the time being. As I'd been planning to initially, I headed for the nation of Vart to the east.

I asked the workers at the inn for information on the road to my destination and things I should make note of so that I didn't get lost. I'd braced myself to have to cross a lengthy path that spanned the country, but I actually arrived at the border that morning. The five nations' respective territories surrounded the Dungeon, so the closer one was to it, the shorter the distance between the countries.

The border was marked only by a rudimentary stone wall, and there was no procedure one had to go through to cross the border. I wondered how they controlled the coming and going of people and things, but then I noticed that one of those ley lines was stretching around the wall and concluded they were managing it through some technique unknown to me.

It didn't take much walking around Vart to see the difference between it and Whoseyards. The wealth disparity was striking, but what really hit me was how differently distributed people's jobs were. The vast majority of the folks I saw were wearing explorer garb. Many carried blades. It was clear that they all dealt with rough stuff in their line of work.

Having made it to this new land, I established a new set of priorities. My number one guiding goal was to effect my great return. If I stayed in this inscrutable death trap of a world, I'd go nuts in short order. I had to run, not walk, back to my own world, for my own sake as well as for the sake of my little sister.

Yet, I had precious few leads. The present front-runner was the grant-any-

wish legend surrounding the Dungeon that practically screamed “dive into me.” If this were a game, that would obviously be the correct choice. But this was reality, and there were no guarantees.

The only other thing that might lead to my great return was studying magic and society and the like. But the chances that that alone would take me home were slim, and there were no guarantees there either. I hadn’t seen anything the least bit like that in the library.

Of course, whether I conquered the Dungeon or spent all my time researching, I’d definitely need money. That was the one thing I could be sure of. If I bought meals and stayed at inns, I’d lose my copper coins. And if I did end up entering the Dungeon, the assortment of tools and equipment I’d need would cost me too. The same went for weapons.

Money, money, money. Without it, I couldn’t do a thing. Which is why I made the choice I did...

“Hey, newbie! Once you’re done washing the dishes, go take out the trash!”

“Yes! Right away!”

I started working part-time at a certain pub. To be honest, I had no desire to enter the Dungeon again. I didn’t even want to see it. Every fiber of my being was against the idea. I figured trying to earn money through the Dungeon was premature. Oh, who am I kidding? I was just afraid of going in there again. In my heart of hearts, I wanted to put it off for a while, if possible.

That was my state of mind as I walked the streets of Vart, and then I spotted a sign for a pub that was seeking a new worker. I figured it couldn’t hurt to try, so I went for the interview. I managed to pass it by weaving a web of lies; no real background check or identity confirmation was conducted, and just like that, they put me to work. Entering the workforce in this world was shockingly smooth. It kind of made me want to bring that process over to the economically depressed countries of my world.

Just so you know, I have experience working part-time in a restaurant, and as far as cooking was concerned, I was the one who handled that every day at

home, so I was confident on that front. As such, it was a reasonable proposition, and I jumped into it without giving it much thought. I didn't regret doing so, as a pub this close to the Dungeon was beyond excellent as a source of information.

"Siiieg! Clean this up, hon!"

"Right away!"

Sieg. A Western-sounding alias I cooked up because I feared going by Aikawa Kanami. What spooked me primarily was how that weirdo girl Lastiara found out my real name. I was now "Siegfried Vizzita." It was the name that had sprung out of me on the spur of the moment, and I didn't even know if it was an actual name they used in the west. You can laugh at me for being basic or your standard game-brain sufferer. I wanted to go by the name of a famous hero of legend like Siegfried in order to stand out to anyone familiar with the reference, and this was the result. It wasn't a given that there were no other residents from my world in this one. And if I ever crossed paths with one, it made sense to go with a name that was more mainstream than not, so they'd realize I was their fellow outworlder. And there was a chance that non-Japanese people from Earth might know the name Siegfried through the Song of the Nibelungs. It was vital that it be both a name not used in this world and also a name that rang a bell in my world, and Siegfried fulfilled those criteria. I'd already heard people in this world tell me it was an unusual name.

Or perhaps I should say, that was the limit of my brain's coldness. I couldn't deny that I was swayed by the coolness of the name. It was only after the fact that I thought I ought to have used the name of a country or religion in my world, or the name of the head of state of a well-known country in my world, but I couldn't very well revise my alias now. I was stuck with Siegfried.

"C'mon, Sieg, hon! Hurry up!"

"Sorry! I'll do it now!"

Ms. Lyeen, the pretty poster girl for the pub, chided me for stopping in my tracks. It was dinnertime, the busiest period of the day. The seats were filled with explorers who'd come to fill their stomachs after a day of Dungeon diving. They were a crude and rowdy bunch, and the hustle and bustle were noisy as all get-out, but you couldn't say the place wasn't full of life. I did miscellaneous

chores while I picked up information regarding the Dungeon.

“Heh heh, we earned a buttload o’ money today.”

“Yeah, I was sweating bullets when we came across that swarm of Soldier Ants, but in the end, today’s hunt was lucrative.”

“Course, it’s all down to luck whether ya encounter a swarm or not. It was risky, but ya can’t argue with the spoils.”

“It turned out great.”

There was lots of talk of the Dungeon in the pub. At the tables, veteran explorers were reflecting on their dives and exchanging information, so pricking up my ears was proving worthwhile. I was using *Dimension* to eavesdrop as I wiped tables.

“Hey there, sonny, you new? Did the lad before ya quit?”

More than a few struck up conversations with me as I worked. Unlike in my world, restaurants here were chummy. Excessively so.

“I’m new, sir, yes. My name’s Sieg. I started today. I’m told the person before me quit.”

“I see. Makes sense, though; they work ya awful hard for what they pay ya.” The man laughed good-humoredly.

“What’s wrong with low pay?!” roared my boss from the kitchen. The man only laughed more.

The balance of power at this pub was one of a kind. From what I was told, the place’s manager was a Dungeon explorer of some renown, and he never backed down an inch when it came to the ruffians who made up his clientele. I heard him yell at his customers more times than I could count. I reckoned that was the only way to run an establishment right beside the Dungeon. For example, if an employee like Ms. Lyeen seemed to be about to take a ribbing, our boss would come barreling over to rescue her. I hadn’t known him for long, but he seemed responsible and trustworthy. That being said, seeing as he’d hired me on the spot, I had absolutely no faith in his business acumen.

“Wonder how long you’re gonna last here, buddy. Ain’t nobody but nuisances

come here to eat, myself included.”

“Oh no, everybody here is so kindhearted,” I replied. “I can work here without complaint.”

“Oho, a practiced hand, I see. And you’ve got a way with words the last guy definitely didn’t!”

“Thank you, sir; you’re too kind.”

“Then again, ya shouldn’t be too stiff either. You can hang loose.” He patted me on the shoulder.

The voice from inside boomed even louder. “Krowe! Quit holdin’ up my new worker or I’ll knock your lights out!”

It seemed my boss and the guy named Krowe knew each other. He didn’t go easy on him, and he made that clear through his words.

“All right, so, I’m going to go back to work,” I said. “The dishes are waiting for me.”

“Heh heh, yeah, I wouldn’t be first in line for a beatdown from the old-timer either,” said Krowe, nodding with a hand held up in surrender.

I hurried back to the kitchen and commenced the work of making the large quantity of dishes clean again. I was entrusted with taking the dishes away and washing them, and my job was to work hard doing it, starting in the evening and ending late at night. It wasn’t easy, having to move without pause for that long, but the experience I’d built up back in my world came in handy. Also, because I had *Dimension* active the whole time, I was able to get things done efficiently, which was a huge help as well. And that was how my first day on the job in this world went.

The night wore on, and the Dungeon divers started leaving little by little. As soon as the last person exited, my boss came out from the kitchen.

“Phew-ee. Finally done, eh, newbie? So, how was it? Your first day?”

“We had quite a few customers, so I feel a nice sense of accomplishment,” I said as I cleaned the floor, thereby demonstrating to him that I had stamina to spare. I was eager for him to think of me as a useful employee.

“Look at you. Cheeky bastard. Seems like you can handle tomorrow night too.”

“Wait, was I being cheeky just now?”

“Well, how do I put it? You talk so weirdly politely that it wraps around and sounds cheeky, I guess.”

“Now that you mention it, I did get called ‘stiff’ earlier...”

There was perhaps a culture gap between our worlds. By speaking politely, I’d meant to be as innocuous as I could, but it was possible it didn’t have the effect I wanted in this world. I needed to see things in a slightly different light. From that point onward, I’d aim to be an employee who was plainspoken and direct, just like Krowe-san was saying.

“Don’t worry too much about it,” said my boss. “You’ll get used to it bit by bit. I think your skills in the kitchen are even more promising than your skills looking after the customers.”

“Hold on,” said Ms. Lyeen, who, at the word “kitchen,” drew nearer. Her long, swaying brown braids became her tall figure. “He’s doing kitchen stuff too?”

“Yeah,” said my boss, “I’m thinking of having him work the kitchen too. I tested him, and he knows his way around a kitchen knife. He’s good with his hands, and he says he’s been doing kitchen work for a long time.”

“So that’s why he passed the trial period on his first day.”

“The sense I got from talking to him is that he’s conscientious and can do a good job serving customers too. I had no reason not to take him.”

Even so, I thought, it’s weird to have somebody get straight to work without even really explaining anything properly. Not being able to voice thoughts like that was one of the painful things about being a grunt of low standing like me.

“It’s true,” said Ms. Lyeen, “I didn’t have to teach him much.”

“You didn’t, right? It just means my judgment’s spot-on. Now then, I’m heading inside and leaving the rest to you.”

“You got it.”

And with that, my boss went to the kitchen to clean up.

“I’m happy for ya, Sieg,” said Ms. Lyeen. “You need the money, right?”

“Yeah, I should be okay now. Just to warn you, though, it seems things here are extremely different from what I’m used to back in my homeland, so please don’t expect the world from me.” It’d be trouble if they expected too much from me, so I decided to drop a line of defense.

“Oh, right, you said you’re from that faraway country...uhh...”

“It’s called Fania.”

“That’s the one! Fania. Never even heard of Fania. You must’ve traveled one heck of a distance to get here!”

“I dreamed of getting rich quick in the Dungeon, and this is what it got me.” I showed her the burn mark at the bottom of my neck.

My story as of now was that I was a country boy who had tackled the Dungeon in hopes of making a speedy fortune but got my ass beat in a day.

“Eep, that looks painful. But at least you didn’t get your arms torn off or your eyes crushed, so that’s good! And you won’t be dying while you’re working here!” she said morbidly, though her tone remained as light as ever.

Our outlooks on the world were different to begin with, of course, and there was also the fact that she must have seen a thing or two while working here, given it was on the front line of Dungeon diving. It was only natural she’d go to such macabre places.

“Looks like I won’t have to worry about food as long as I’m working here, so I’m happy.”

“Sweet. Excellent. Keep on working with us. I’m rooting for ya. You’ve got better manners than the last guy, that’s for sure. And you’re quick to learn too!”

Ms. Lyeen’s impression of me seemed favorable. Only, my manners were a product of my education level being higher than theirs, and as for my being “quick to learn,” that had a ton to do with *Dimension*. It seemed kind of like I was cheating, so I felt a tad guilty.

“I’ll give it my all, ma’am. All right, I’ll go clean the tables too.”

“Okay, hon, I’ll help.”

Once the cleanup was over, the plan was to talk to my boss about my contract. I was told that since they lacked manpower, they’d treat me well, but I might be the one to turn them down depending on the details of the contract. After all, this job was nothing more than a means to an end for me, and I was at the stage where I wouldn’t balk at trying various different means.

“Phew, and that’s that. Lock up the entrance for me, Sieg!” she said, leaving me with the task of rounding out the night before walking to the back of the building.

“Yes, ma’am.” I did as I was told and went to the entrance. I was about to close the latch when I noticed it: something had tripped *Dimension*. Somebody was outside the pub. I checked how much MP I had left.

“Stats... Okay good, I can do it. *Layered Dimension*.”

I spent the MP I had left to gather information on the situation outside. *Layered Dimension* was a spell derived from *Dimension*. All it meant was spending more MP to expand the range of effect, but I figured I’d change the name in order to distinguish it from the standard *Dimension* spell. Plus, my pet theory held that the longer the name of the spell, the more exhilarating it felt to cast it.

Outside the establishment stood a large wooden bulletin board, and it seemed there was a hooded kid around my age squatting in front of it. Curious, I stepped outside. Drops of white were falling, and though the precipitation was light, it was a pretty view. These drops of white were collectively called “tiarlay,” and they weren’t the snow you’d see in my world. They weren’t ice crystals that fell in winter, but rather falling crystals of magical energy that accumulated in the sky. I’d learned that tidbit in the library, but I didn’t know the details.

Tiarlay was piled up atop the kid’s hood. I figured I’d try talking to him. “Hey, you awake?”

The hooded kid looked up at me, eyes wide with surprise, and our gazes met.

It was a girl. Blonde hair had spilled out from inside her hood when she'd lifted her head to look up at me. Her hair was as long and as straight as the warm rays of the sun. Her largish azure eyes left an impression, and her face was androgynous and cherubic. She got to her feet, still looking at me. We had to be around the same age, but she was way shorter than me, petite.

I talked to her as a pub employee. "Good, you're awake. We're closing up shop, so..."

A pause. "I can't stay where I am?" she asked bluntly.

"Uhh, well, I guess it's all right as long as you don't do anything weird. I guess."

"Okay, then I'll be staying put. Let me know when I start being in the way." She sat back down. Her manner of speech was gruff and masculine, and it didn't fit her face.

"Wait, that's not the issue here! I mean, it's the middle of the night, and it's dangerous out here for a girl all on her own."

Maybe I was being a busybody, sticking my nose into her business without even knowing her deal, but my sense of duty from back in my world was pushing the words from my mouth. "Why don't you find an inn to stay at—"

"I haven't got the money. I'm staying here in front of the tavern, where it's warm," she retorted, slicing my rote response to shreds.



There was nothing else I could say. All I could do was close up shop and pretend not to have seen her. My heart ached for her. It couldn't be pleasant for a girl like that to be forced to sleep outdoors. But there was nothing I could do for a total stranger. It wasn't as though I had time or energy or resources to spare.

"W-Well, all right. I'll lock up, then." Reluctantly, I made to close the door.

"Also," I heard her say right before the door fully closed, "I'm not a girl. Don't worry about me."

Evidently, she wasn't a she. And to him, not being a girl meant I didn't have to worry about him. I was taken aback, but I finished closing the door anyway. I didn't know whether it was a lie, but I decided it'd be pointless to give it any more thought.

I walked to the back of the building, where Ms. Lyeen and the manager were waiting. I shook off all thought of the pretty androgynous face I had just seen and started talking about my contract with my boss. I say "contract," but it was pretty loose and broad, and not as down-to-the-details as the sort you'd see back in my world. For the time being, he'd try out various work schemes with me on a per diem basis. My pay would keep changing based on the fruits of my labor each day, and on that day, he gave me ten copper coins. In addition, he'd even give me room and board—he told me I could lodge in a corner of the pub. I was surprised by how nice I had it. It was so nice, I actually ended up giving him constructive criticism; I suggested all this might be a bit careless for a suspicious-looking individual like me, but he assured me he was confident in his eye for character and left it at that.

Ms. Lyeen, for her part, told me that if I tried to pull something, they knew my face so they could just stop by a ley line and get me arrested in a jiffy. Apparently, the ley lines stretching here and there in town were for policing and crime prevention. Perhaps that explained, in part, their open-armed welcome.

With all that settled, I found myself tucked under a blanket in a corner of the building with a proper roof over my head. Compared to that kid from before, my situation was heaven.

"Status, skills." I tested out various things regarding my menu-sight. As I

looked for new abilities, I calmly and coolly planned my next moves. Since I'd just secured a stable income, my desperation levels had dipped a lot lower. The ??? skill erased the majority of my bewilderment and fear toward this other world, and it was paying the utmost attention to stabilizing my heart and emotions. All that was left to do was logically and rationally move ever closer to my great return, one step at a time.

"They did tell me I only have to work nights. Guess I'll walk around town gathering info until noon tomorrow."

First, I'd gather information over the course of a few days and fill my head with the common knowledge of this world. I'd also master the use of my menu-sight and magic, as well as assemble some equipment and tools before finally tackling the Dungeon again.

I kept experimenting with my menu-sight until I fell asleep. And so my second day in this world passed by peacefully.



The thought struck me after contemplating all sorts of things the previous night. *Maybe all we need to blow through a dungeon like this is an industrial revolution.*

It was crucial that I exhibit my strengths as an outworlder. By working to further this world's level of civilization, I could use machines instead of magic to clear the Dungeon, and that'd be enjoyable. However, the reality was I had neither the time nor the connections for that. Moreover, it was uncertain whether the laws of physics were the same. I figured I'd test them out one of these days, but it wasn't something I could do without money.

Yet again, I hit the money barrier. Reluctantly, I went for a roam around town. It seemed money made this world go 'round too. I meandered from public body to public body in order to take in this world's culture. In addition, I toured fantasy world staple stores like weapon shops and curio shops. There were magic gem shops as well for the purposes of mages, but they were all too expensive and far above my means. The information gathering was simple and not at all flashy, but I thought of it as a bit of sightseeing, so it wasn't all that bad.

The time flew by, and before long my shift at the pub was at hand. Just like the day before, I did miscellaneous chores amid the hustle and bustle. My job description hadn't changed, but I wasn't doing exactly the same things as my first day. It was time for a novel application of my menu-sight. When I used *Analyze* on a monster, a menu with its information appeared, and when I tested to see whether it also worked on people, I discovered that it did.

For example, when I tried using *Analyze* on a big man with a large scar on his face:

【STATUS】

NAME:Alvin Coalzsun

HP: 165/172

MP: 0/0

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 11

STR 6.72

VIT 4.54

DEX 2.01

AGI 1.78

INT 1.32

MAG 0.00

APT 0.67

There was zero privacy in this, but it was surprisingly fun. Getting caught up in the moment, I checked the strength of every customer that came into the shop. Also, by observing a variety of different people, my understanding of the text displays deepened, and there was no reason to stop. I discovered I could narrow the focus of my menu-sight as well. If, when viewing someone's menu, I strongly desired to know only their name, level, and skills, this is how it

appeared for me:

【STATUS】

Alvin Coalzsun Lvl. 11

Innate Skills: Sewing 1.10

Acquired Skills: Swordplay 1.23

Evidently, sewing was his specialty. I chuckled at the disconnect between his hulking frame and that particular forte. And I kept surveying all sorts of people the same way. Then, I spotted a familiar face. It was the feminine-looking self-professed boy whose acquaintance I’d made the day before at closing time. The kid’s hood concealed his face, but I was using *Dimension* when I had time on my hands, so I knew right away who he was. He was seated at the counter and had requested a light meal. It seemed Ms. Lyeen had taken his order. I was on the clock, so I couldn’t strike up a conversation, but I used *Analyze* just to see his name and skills.

【STATUS】

Diablo Sith

INNATE SKILLS: Holy Magic 3.78, Divine Protection 3.07, Condemn 2.00, Concentration 2.02, Elemental Magic 2.09, Overprotection 2.00, Life Support 2.23, Targeting 2.02

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 0.09

???:???

My mouth was agape. “Wait, what?”

I’d looked at the menus of dozens of people just that day, but this was the first time I’d seen anything this *extra*. For the most part, people tended to have one or two skills. Seasoned adventurers might have three. Moreover, the values of those skills usually only ranged from 0.00 to 2.00, and there were none

besides myself with a skill that exceeded 3.00. Yet this kid not only boasted nine skills, but also high numbers to go with the majority of them. *What am I looking at?*

“Hey, no spacing out on the job!” shouted Ms. Lyeen. “Boss told ya to go wash dishes in the back!”

“Ah, right away ma’am!”

It seemed the kitchen had gotten busier. With great reluctance, I withdrew to the back. Tired as I was of it, I did my job and washed the dirty dishes that had piled up in the kitchen. All the while, as you might expect, I had that Diablo kid on my mind. With that you-can’t-be-serious suite of abilities, it was like the world was playing favorites with him, so to speak. Thinking about it under the assumption that this world was a video game, chances were high that he had some kind of important role to play. There was also the possibility he was burdened with a similar set of circumstances as me.

I wanted to set up an opportunity to introduce myself and talk to him, but I wanted it to come across as casual and organic. While I was simulating my conversation with Diablo in my head as I continued silently washing the dishes, a voice boomed from one of the tables. This pub was already unceasingly raucous and noisy, but since I heard Diablo’s voice (which I knew from the night before), I went out to see what the fuss was about.

The man with the booming voice laughed. “Ha ha ha! Team up with a Level 1 snot like you? What’s in it for us? We don’t wanna die ’cause you dragged us down!”

There was a crowd around them now.

“I know I’m low level, okay?” retorted the kid, his voice soprano. “But I’ve got confidence in my sword skills. And I can use a bit of basic magic too!”

The kid was blond; I’d been a tad confused at first, but it was almost definitely Diablo. The night before, he’d had his silky hair long, but today it was trimmed short and tied up in the back. I guess that was why he had a totally different vibe from before. He looked like an androgynous pretty boy now.

The woman sitting beside the guffawing man spoke to Diablo in a mollifying

tone. “Oh, good on you for being able to do magic. That said, Level 1 is lower level than even your average small child. Normally, you’d have leveled up at *some* point before now. Helping out your folks with the chores and just doing normal everyday stuff, you ought to be around Level 3 by your age. For you to still be Level 1, surely you can’t expect us to conclude that you are anything other than some rich kid who’s never known hardship. Either that, or there’s some problem holding you back, right?”

“Grr!” The woman’s logic had Diablo at a loss for words.

“She’s right! Still being at Level 1’s bleedin’ ridiculous! Ha ha ha!” The man looked at the lost-for-words Diablo and riled him up even more. “You’re unique, ’cause finding somebody who’s Level 1’s actually really hard! Ah ha ha ha!”

From the look of it, the man wanted a laugh at Diablo’s expense. Seeing as I’d been Level 1 until recently, his words stung me too.

“Sh-Shut up! Don’t make fun of me! I can still fight at this level!” Diablo made to grab at him, but the man sidestepped with ease and poured even more salt into the wound. The blood must have rushed to the kid’s head, because he was on a rampage, firing back with puerile insults.

None of the other customers had any intention of stopping the fight. They must have figured such quarreling was par for the course, but it was a different story for me. This Diablo kid harbored loads of potential. I had the ability to sneak peeks at the talents of others, and I could tell this one was a promising pawn I could take advantage of.

The childish scuffle intensified, morphing into a foulmouthed swearing match. Presumably due to the level gap, Diablo couldn’t get a solid jab in. I tried approaching him in order to get on his good side, but he ended up getting stopped by Ms. Lyeen before I could intervene.

“All right, all right, break it up! If you’re here to fool around, take it outside. Quit being so immature; it’s just a kid!” Ms. Lyeen looked exasperated, but she was clearly used to scolding troublemakers.

“Oh c’mon,” said the man, “we’re just here looking for party members. Then this kid who ain’t qualified got up in our grill, and we took the time to tell ’em how the world works, that’s all.”

Ms. Lyeen pulled the two apart. “Fine, then you’ve taught ’em enough already. And you too! Cool that tantrum!”

“Dammit!” Diablo must have realized there was no point in going at it with the guy anymore. He gave Ms. Lyeen what he owed and made for the exit.

“Nobody’s gonna team up with a Level 1-er!” said the man from behind. “Better think of something else.”

Ms. Lyeen didn’t take the man to task. She and most everybody here were of the same opinion. Diablo clicked his tongue and exited the pub.

I promptly intoned a spell under my breath, sinking almost all of my MP into expanding *Dimension* and tracked where Diablo was going. I wasn’t about to lose him; he was tremendously gifted, and I figured he was my ticket to reducing the legwork I needed to explore the Dungeon by a good fifty percent or so.

“All right, everybody, back to your seats. And you too, Sieg. Don’t just stand there watching; get back to work.”

“Ah, right. Yes, ma’am.”

I got back to work, dividing my attention between my tasks and tracking Diablo. I did the same final duties as the day before, and then it was closing time.



Afterward, I sensed that Diablo had entered the Dungeon through *Dimension*. But he got roughed up and left pretty quickly; I could tell at a glance his dive had been fruitless.

Once we closed up for the day, my boss and I exchanged views regarding the basics of cooking, and I prepared something nice and light, which became my meal for the night, arranged over one of the restaurant’s tables. Then, just as I’d planned, I went out to search for Diablo, who I was sure was feeling disheartened. I used the last of my MP and spotted him squatting in a back alley.

“I’m so hungry...” He seemed in extremely low spirits.

“Oh, hey, fancy seeing you again,” I said, pretending it was a coincidence.

“You’re the pub worker?”

“Yep. No money today either?”

“As you can clearly see, I’m not exactly well-fed,” he said with a self-deprecating shrug.

“Perfect, then. We’ve got some extra food. Want some?”

“Extra food?”

He seemed a tad suspicious, so I immediately used the line I’d prepared beforehand. “After closing up, I practice cooking at the pub. Tonight, I made a fair few duds, and I’m worried the food’ll go to waste.”

“Oh, got it, okay. But is that really allowed? I get the feeling you’re not really supposed to just hand that stuff out.”

“To tell you the truth, I was there when you caused that disturbance. As an employee, I should’ve put a stop to the fight, but I was too spineless to do anything. I felt the need to apologize, so I thought I’d do something nice for you.”

“Oh, so you were there to see it. Don’t worry, I didn’t think anything of it. That said, I’ll take the food. I’ll take anything I can get.” With that, Diablo got to his feet.

While I may have aroused a speck of suspicion, it seemed I’d successfully baited him with food. We made small talk as we headed for the pub and then tucked into our meals together.

Diablo was surprised by my cooking, in a good way. Maybe the culture of cooking in this world hadn’t advanced to a particularly high level yet.

“This is *good*. By the way, I hear you’re a Dungeon diver. The lady you work with told me.”

“Well, I’m trying anyway.”

While at work, I sometimes turned up my sleeves, and whenever that happened, my burns became visible. Curious customers would then ask Ms.

Lyeen or whoever else about that state of affairs.

“How far did you get?”

It seemed his interest lay in the Dungeon. Our conversation flowed to it organically. I kept my cool and chose my words carefully. “I went in solo and got pretty hurt on Floor 1. Haven’t dived again since.”

“You were flying solo too?” He grinned broadly, the smile of somebody who’d found a kindred spirit.

“I haven’t had much luck with companions.”

“I see.”

I covertly examined his expression; I had to guess what he was thinking and coax him right where I wanted. We talked about our knowledge of the Dungeon, our level and stats, and more. By chatting about all things Dungeon-diving, I finally lured the words I’d been so eagerly awaiting from Diablo’s mouth.

“Hey, uh, if you don’t mind,” he said diffidently, fighting his nerves, “do you wanna go into the Dungeon with me?”

By that point, if he hadn’t invited me soon, I would’ve invited him myself. I took him up on his offer with no compunction. “Sure, I’m down. We’re around the same level, after all, and I think helping each other out’s a good idea.”

“Whoa, really?! Thanks, dude!”

“Only, I’ve gotta work nights at the pub. I can only help you out in the mornings.”

“Oh, that’s no problem, no problem at all. You’re really helping me out!” Diablo thanked me up and down, his smile radiant.

From the look of it, he was particularly moved since he’d endeavored long and hard to find comrades. And while I didn’t let it show on my face, I was inwardly pumping my fists in triumph. Gaining a collaborator who genuinely felt he owed me was big. With an ally versed in the ways of this world at my side, it’d be easier for me to deal with unforeseen roadblocks down the line.

“Cool, so, can we start tomorrow?!”

“Sounds good to me. My name’s Siegfried Vizzita. Call me Sieg for short.”

“Got it. My name’s Dia. No surname; just ‘Dia’ is fine, so call me that!”

He didn’t react in any way to my name. Given his ridiculous stats and bevy of skills, I’d held on to the nonzero hope that he was from my world, but obviously, that wasn’t the case. Also, the name he gave and the name on his menu differed; according to my menu-sight, he did in fact have a surname, as he was shown as “Diablo Sith.” On the other hand, it didn’t seem to me that he was deliberately lying. Perhaps his menu was giving me information on the name he would *eventually* call himself. Or maybe these video gamey menus had some kind of catch to them.

Dia giggled happily. “Heh heh heh!” His expression was many times cuter than your average girl’s. Not that my face was the picture of masculinity, but his was in a league of its own. I used my menu-sight to try to see if it outlined his sex and/or gender, but that wasn’t one of the attributes listed. Of course, whether he was a boy or a girl had no bearing on Dungeon exploration, so I stopped dwelling on it.

“Right, so, it’s nice to meet you, Dia.”

“Same here!”

【PARTY】

Diablo Sith has joined the party.

Dia thanked me for the food and took his leave with a smile on his face. I did ask about where he’d sleep, and he told me he’d sleep out in the open air as usual, but I couldn’t do anything about that. Even just letting him into the pub after closing hours was a no-no.

Back in my little corner of the pub, my thoughts raced. What would the next day bring? I fell asleep as I worked out strategies to clear the Dungeon alongside Dia.



I got up early in the morning and went out to buy some basic goods. That only reduced how much quality sleep I was getting, but I was used to being sleep-deprived. I made my way to the church, our rendezvous point, ahead of time. There, I saw a priest reading from what looked like a Bible and a crowd of people actively praying. Among them was Dia.

In this world, many offered up their prayers to God (or maybe gods). There were many who simply believed in the religion, but there were also divers whose work involved violence and who didn't seem too pious among those praying. That was because praying was part of the process of leveling up. The priest's chanting was a mix of the usual precepts and arias stimulating level-ups, and as such, people from all walks of life visited the church. The God in my world never did anything for anybody, so that was a point of difference. With a religion that leveled people up, it was a small wonder a bunch of allied nations had popped up around it.

Dia finished praying, spoke a bit with the priest, and then came to me.

"Oh, hey, Sieg. Already here?"

"Morning, Dia. You're up early."

"I thought maybe I'd leveled up, but no dice."

"Gotcha. That's a shame." I checked Dia's stats:

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 39/52

MP: 431/431

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 1

STR 0.59

VIT 1.12

DEX 0.92

AGI 0.88

INT 1.34

MAG 23.25

APT 5.00

CONDITION: Protection 1.00

EXP: 89/100

All he needed was a bit more EXP. And his stats remained as absurd as ever. Especially that whopper of a magic stat.

We discussed our battle plan as we headed to the Dungeon. “So, you want me to draw the monsters’ attention,” I said.

“Sorry, but yeah, please,” Dia answered. “I lack power, so it looks like I don’t deal any damage to monsters with my sword. Now that I’m part of a team of two, I think I’ll try using magic.”

It appeared he had been so obsessed with finding comrades and teaming up because he couldn’t take down monsters alone. It made sense, as one couldn’t effectively cast anti-monster magic when going solo.

So you’re not even a swordfighter at all, then, are you? I wondered. *Why don’t you just drop the sword?* But I didn’t voice those thoughts; it’d no doubt rub the aspiring swordfighter the wrong way.

“Okay, sure,” I replied, “but I intend to exclusively avoid them. I don’t wanna get hurt if I can help it.”

“That’s fine by me. It’ll make a world of difference if you just play advance guard.”

“It’s certainly true that’d be the best battle formation, since I’m suited to detecting enemies and disrupting them.”

“I’ll fight with my sword too, after I level up. Please bear with me until then.”

I really think you should be focusing on your magic. But again, I didn’t voice that thought. If I did, he’d ask why I thought that, and I’d have to make mention

of my menu-sight.

“All right,” I said, “so I’ll stand in front of you, searching for enemies.”

We arrived at the entrance to the Dungeon before our discussion ran its course. Unlike Whoseyards’s aesthetically pleasing Dungeon entrance, the one here in Vart was awfully dilapidated, and there were no guards either.

“All right, off we go.”

And so I found myself tackling the Dungeon a second time. Inwardly, I was a mess, anxiety and fear whirling and twisting inside me. But I strove to keep all that concealed. I’d gathered information. I’d hit the books and researched most everything there was to know about the monsters. I’d heard the divers at the pub recount a ton of their experiences. My equipment was on point and I had all the tools I needed. And while I was a bit uneasy about him, I also had a companion whose overflowing talent I could rely on. I could now do things while using my menu-sight at the same time. I was used to my magic and could put it to practical use. I could hardly ask for more to take on the Dungeon.

I kept breathing calmly, soothing my mind and soul, and stepped over the threshold into that gloomy, shadowy path to hell. The Dungeon’s pungent stench hit my nostrils, and I walked down the dimly lit corridor.

Our first monster encounter was a Mandibeetle. I detected it after we veered off from the Pathway Proper and proceeded a small distance away from it. I’d heard the Vart section of Floor 1 hosted a lot of insectoids, and Mandibeetles were one of the monster types I had expected to find. Using *Dimension*’s ability to track enemies, I always took the initiative and activated a form of the spell called *Dimension: Calculash*. It was a version of *Dimension* specialized for battle, narrowing the area of effect in order to dramatically raise the attentiveness and sense of distance demanded by combat.

From what a mage had told me at the pub, magic changed shape depending on how its user visualized it. And this spell was a good example of that. Through *Calculash*, I could track every move the enemy monster made.

“Monster’s by itself. Let’s do this according to plan.”

“Got it!”

We stepped into the fray in the formation we'd arranged beforehand. Dia launched into the incantation he needed to chant in order to fire his magic, and I blocked the Mandibeetle from seeing him, pointing my sword at its eyes.

It charged at me. I brought down my blade with all my might, halting its advance. Fending off its sharp pincers, I deflected and evaded its attacks, positioning myself such that it never went for Dia even as I concentrated on defense.

Thanks in part to the effects of my magic, I could tell how it would move. There was no indication its twin pincers would ever so much as graze me. Moreover, although I hadn't fought in a while, I had fought this type of monster before, so I was able to handle it without getting nervous. And most importantly, the creature felt way weaker to me now. After having leveled up, I was faster than before, so the Mandibeetle seemed slower. My muscles were stronger now, so the carapace I hadn't been able to dent the last time now had cracks in it. The monster no longer inspired the same fear. And at the same time, in that moment, it sunk in just how bizarrely this world's level system manifested in practical terms.

"Sieg! I'm firing!"

As I was keeping the Mandibeetle in check, my companion's cue came from behind. I shifted to the side so that Dia could see the monster.

"Flame Arrow!"

Dia completed his spell and it emitted a glint of light. From what I'd heard beforehand, *Flame Arrow* fired a heated arrow of magic energy. It was a beginner spell for fire magic in general, and it seemed to be the only attack spell in Dia's arsenal.

The arrow of flame I'd pictured was just that—flames in the shape of an arrow, fired from something akin to a bow. But the reality was totally different. It wasn't an arrow. It was a beam. A white line spanning space in an instant. It was what could only be called a laser. The eyes couldn't follow it. The moment it shone was the moment the beam fired, and the moment the beam fired was the moment it was over.

Wait, huh? Hold on, that was Flame Arrow?

“All right!” Thrilled that the attack he’d poured his energy into was a success, he clenched his hands in triumph.

With a gaping laser hole seared through it, the Mandibeetle faded away. One hit. One hit, and it had died instantly.

“I killed it! That was almost *too* easy!” Dia said boisterously behind me.

It seemed he hadn’t seen how stupefied I looked. “C-Congratulations...” I said woodenly.

“Thanks, man! This is the first time I’ve ever taken down a monster that size!”

“I’m happy for ya...” But I was in a cold sweat. Dia didn’t understand how abnormal what he’d just done was. I hadn’t heard tell of magic like *that* from any source, books and people included. Of course, his magic stat was 23.25, and his elemental magic skill stood at 2.09 (and that wasn’t counting whatever other factors might have come into play). I couldn’t hide the apprehension born of the realization that those numbers could generate a phenomenon of this magnitude.

In the battles to come, I’d continue operating with a human laser cannon behind me. Sure, I could trust Dia’s character as a person, but we hadn’t known each other for very long. I didn’t know what might happen. Even if there was no malice behind his attack, friendly fire would leave me with a hole in my chest. Lily-livered as I was, I trembled at the thought.

“Thanks to you,” said Dia, “I could concentrate on my magic. Let’s keep at it!”

“Okay. Only, be careful when you fire your spell. Like, for real, though. Be *reeeal* careful.”

“Yep, you got it! Leave it to me!” Dia was ecstatic about obliterating the monster, which only intensified my anxiety.



“R-Right. Well, off we go, I guess. I’ll keep detecting enemies, so let’s stay quiet. Also, if we end up in some unforeseen situation, listen to what I say, okay? No firing magic without my say so.”

As I cautioned him not to spontaneously discharge his spell, I expanded *Dimension*.

“Okay, I’ll follow your instructions. Looks like if I do as you say, we can’t go wrong,” he readily agreed. Evidently, he’d placed a significant measure of trust in me.

I checked our EXP and MP counts as I shifted back to enemy detection mode. Dia had dealt the finishing blow, but we shared the EXP gains. I’d expended about 5 MP for both the enemy detection and combat, while Dia had spent around 3 MP.

Damn, Dia, you are NO joke. His magic was the epitome of low cost, high power. That laser alone almost definitely exceeded the quantity of heat a human body could possess, and that scared me. He was more than skirting the law of conservation of mass—he was straight up ignoring it.

“Ah, if we round that corner, we’ll get an encounter.”

“Okay.”

I’d detected a large monster using *Dimension*. My menu-sight told me its name and rank, which I checked against the information I had. After simulating the battle in my head, we faced off against the creature, which was spiderlike in shape. Yet, if we performed the same process as the last battle, we could crush it without incurring any risk. Sure enough, a hole was blazed through the monstrous spider’s body, and it shone as it faded away into pure light.

“Nice! I shredded it again!”

“That was quick...”

It was so easy, I had half a mind to think of my past self, who’d been so afraid of the Dungeon, as a fool. Since I was using a *Dimension* spell that was modified for battle, I didn’t think I’d ever take a hit. Putting it into video game terms, I guessed it was like getting a dexterity buff, granting substantial bonuses to my

accuracy and evasion.

Dia's *Flame Arrow* was not only overkill in the firepower department, it was so fast that it always hit its target. I forestalled the enemy with the help of my radar and got it into the optimal position. If it didn't notice Dia, his *Flame Arrow* summarily sniped it, reducing it to smithereens. Even if he somehow missed, I was positioned diagonally away from both the enemy and the gun battery that was Dia, so the monster couldn't reach him. The only break point in our strategy that I could think of was my potentially engaging in close-quarters combat too slowly. But now that I was Level 4, I didn't feel as though the enemy was capable of taking me by surprise. Perhaps that was due to the level gap.

Single-monster encounter after single-monster encounter, we continued mowing them down.

"That's another we were able to take down unscathed."

"Sieg, is the Dungeon really this *easy* as long as you've got a party?"

Dia had been overjoyed at first, but after seeing what a one-sided slaughter this dive was turning out to be, he expressed his puzzlement.

"No, it's hardly *easy*. Loads of people have died on Floor 1. And if what the divers at the pub said is true, then we're the exception, not the rule."

"So you mean we're just really strong?"

It was true; given that Dia was still Level 1, his magic packed way too much of a wallop, and that was one reason we were gliding down easy street. However, if I praised him *too* much, I'd lose my leverage as someone useful to him. I wanted a long and fruitful partnership here.

"Yeah, and you've got a talent for magic."

"Really? Then tha—"

"But I think our compatibility's got even more to do with it."

"Our compatibility?"

It was no lie. Our teamwork was ultimately removing any weak point in our tactics.

“We got this far because I’m a magic user with a skill specialized for enemy detection.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve been finding monster after monster in the darkness! And from super far away too!”

“Yeah, I’ve actually been using magic to do it. That’s why the monsters haven’t been getting the drop on us. I’m making sure they can’t target you, our gunner mage. We commence combat only once you’re in a good position. Since you need time to prepare your shot, I’m covering for you flawlessly. That’s our pattern for setting up battles so that we can’t lose.”

“It’s true; back when I fought alone, the monsters would always spot me first, and I never had time to cast my spells. But how are you detecting the enemies in the first place? I’ve never heard of magic like that.”

I was sure he’d understand if I told him. I could, if I wanted to, explain that I was using both my dimensional magic and menu-sight to find enemies without letting any slip past my notice. However, my info-gathering over the past few days had told me that no one had even heard of dimensional magic, to say nothing of my menu-sight. These were abilities that only I possessed. I hated the idea of opening a can of worms by letting those secrets out, and above all, I was too much of a coward to freely disclose much of anything about myself.

“It’s an old spell passed down in my homeland. It’s a secret technique, so I can’t go into detail about it, but it has the power to detect monsters.”

“Gotcha. So it’s a rare skill, huh?”

That was explanation enough for Dia. After all, for those who engaged in rough stuff as their line of work, keeping their cards close to the vest was a matter of course. Maybe he didn’t pry further because he understood that.

“It does drain my MP fast, though. To tell you the truth, I get a hundred times more worn out than you do.”

“Makes sense. You’re using magic all the time, even when you’re not fighting. And when it’s time to fight, you lure the monsters into position,” he mused apologetically.

Good. I managed to pitch my power to him, and I’ve got him feeling indebted

to me. “Don’t worry, I’ll tell you if I’m running low on MP. Which will be soon, I think. And I can’t stay too long in the Dungeon in the first place. I gotta get to my shift at the pub, so it’s decent timing.”

“Okay. How about we go just a little deeper and beat a strong-looking one, then?”

“I’m down. I asked around the pub about enemy placement, so I know what direction we’ll find strong ones in.”

“Awesome! Let’s go!”

My menu-sight clued me in on enemy ranks. As such, I had considered the possibility that we’d bump into a monster we couldn’t manage, but had determined that probability to be quite low, so I readily agreed to Dia’s suggestion.

Thus, we continued our string of deliberate curb-stomp battles and ventured deeper into the Dungeon, never tiring of hunting monsters until the sun reached high noon.



Around the thirty-monsters-defeated mark, my MP had gotten low.

“Ah, damn, I can’t keep my magic going for much longer.”

“What, already?”

It was nearly noon. As we’d been engaging in battle after battle for several hours straight, we’d soon be unable to continue exploring.

“I’m gonna exit the Dungeon. What’ll you do?”

“Oh, uhh, I dunno. You don’t wanna keep being advance guard for me without your monster detection...do you?”

That’s a big fat no! I wanted to yell at him, but I kept it nice and gentle. “Err, well, I don’t think that’ll be very efficient, as it’ll increase the probability we get hurt. I was actually using magic during combat too, so I’ll also be weaker than normal for close-quarters combat.”

“Hold on, you used magic and your sword at the *same time*?”

“Yeah. It’s an old method of applying the magic. It allows me to hone my senses.”

“So you’ve been using magic this entire time, huh? I thought you were a swordfighter, with how fast you are! So I guess you’re actually a magic user first?”

“Yep. And now that I’m out of MP, I’m just a liability.”

In reality, I just didn’t want to fight while I had no MP. I didn’t want to create opportunities where I couldn’t defend Dia. Without magic, felling monsters would consume a great deal of time and stamina. And the more time this took, the more likely some unexpected situation would be triggered. The more chances I gave the enemy to attack, the easier it became to fall into a state of affairs whereby we were rendered unable to defend ourselves due to the enemy’s special abilities. It’d be a deadly struggle without any benefit.

“All right, I gotcha. I’ll escort you outside and then go it alone.”

“Wait, hold on, go it *alone*? W-Wait a sec, Dia!”

Dia was trying to rush in the opposite direction of what I wanted from him. How brash from a gun battery of a mage like him! And who would his death inconvenience? Me!

“Dia, don’t tell me you’re planning to dive the Dungeon *by yourself*?”

“Yeah, I do. I’ve got time, and I’ve been going it alone until today. It’ll be just like always.”

“Uh-huh, and how many monsters have you beaten before today?”

He faltered. “Ack...”

“If you can take down monsters by yourself, then I won’t say anything.”

“Urgh...I’ve won before.” He avoided my gaze and began fidgeting.

“Oh, I believe you. But how many times have you ‘won’? You’ve been tackling the Dungeon for ages, right? So how many monsters have you taken down by yourself before today?”

“One. One monster...”

“Please don’t,” I replied immediately. “I’d be worried sick.”

Perhaps it’s a harsh way to put it, but I couldn’t afford to lose the collaborator I’d gone to all this trouble for.

“But you saw how many I was able to beat today! I think I’ve got a feel for it now!”

“You just took them down using your magic, that’s all! You haven’t been able to beat any monsters up till now because you can’t fire spells by yourself, remember? And you ought to know that better than anyone, right?”

“But I’ve got my blade!”

“You can’t take ’em down *because* that blade’s not working on ’em!”

I could see Dia’s stats. I knew him better than he did. He was practically made for magic. Him using a sword would be a pointless waste.

“But I’ve got no time,” muttered Dia, his expression serious. “I need power, and I need money...as quickly as possible.”

The stubborn, strong will behind those words was giving me a headache.

“You can swing that sword around all day long and it won’t take down any monsters. If you could use magic more easily, I’d understand. If you could cast spells without help, I wouldn’t mind. But that’s just not how it is, is it?”

“No, I *refuse* to rely on magic. I couldn’t help but use magic today, but I wanna get stronger with the blade. Fighting with my sword is my dream. That’s why I wanna train with it...”

I wanted to tell him he had no talent with the blade and to focus solely on magic. But I resisted the urge to break his heart like that, and I delivered my next words gently. “But *why* the blade? If it’s money and power you want, you should hone your magic and take down loads of monsters. Then you’d attain success and earn money while you’re at it.”

“That may be true. And yet...I refuse to use anything but the sword!”

To say Dia was thinking rationally would be charitable, at best. He was obsessed with the blade on an emotional basis. Talking him out of it would be impossible; our bond wasn’t deep enough yet.

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.”

I scratched my head and checked his stats. He had more than enough EXP to level up, and his HP had somewhat decreased.

“Okay. If you wanna use the sword no matter what, I won’t stop you. I mean, if you can use both a sword and magic, that can only help. That said, I want you to be fully prepared, so let’s leave the Dungeon and take a breather for now.”

Dia looked surprised. “S-Sure. Got it.”

“Something wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just...I didn’t think I’d actually manage to get you on board. Nobody’s ever told me that my using a sword was a good idea.”

Apparently, Dia was truly useless with a blade. I’d been playing the role of advance guard, so I never saw his pathetic sword skills for myself, but evidently it was so bad that anybody who watched him felt compelled to warn him to stop using it.

“Well...let’s just say I understand how you feel.”

“You do?”

When I played video games, swords were often my weapon of choice as well. Swords hold a certain amount of charm for boys, and characters who use swords tend to be the protagonists of tales set in fictional worlds like these. It was just like a kid to want to be the hero of their story, so I understood his desire to use one, however futile that desire proved to be.

In truth, I only wanted Dia to fight using magic. But if I tried to force him, I’d end up alienating him. Maybe that sort of underhanded calculation was part of the reason my tone grew more conciliatory.

“Th-Thank you, Sieg.” He scratched his blushing cheek bashfully.

I blushed too. His red cheeks looked nice next to his blond hair. I couldn’t see “him” as anything but a gorgeous young girl, mannerisms included. I suspected “he” was, in fact, a girl, but I put the brakes on that train of thought. I saw nothing in it for me if I got to the bottom of it. If it wound up decreasing how

much he liked me, it'd mean all that time I spent making him like me would come to nothing. As such, I resolved never to grill him about his sex or gender. To me, he was an ally for clearing the Dungeon. Nothing more, nothing less.

I used the remainder of my MP to dodge our enemies, and we made our way out of the Dungeon, discussing the items the monsters had dropped along the way.

"Oh yeah," I said, "how are we gonna divvy up these magic gems?"

"I saw party-members-wanted posters," said Dia, "and I think almost all of them said they split things equally."

"Okay, then let's do it fifty-fifty."

"But you're more worn out, so maybe you should take more than me."

"Let's not make it complicated. We helped each other, so we each get half. Keep it fifty-fifty, no matter what. Nice and simple, with no resentment."

"Uh-huh, gotcha."

I would have actually preferred *him* to take the larger share. I wanted him to eat and sleep well and to load up on good equipment and tools, et cetera. But fifty-fifty was reasonable for now.

"Plus, once we're back outside, try visiting a church."

"But I already went this morning."

"Sure, but given all those battles we just fought, you might have leveled up since. We should probably hit the church a ton while we're still lower-level."

I encouraged him to go because I knew for a fact he would level up. I also advised him to pick up a set of equipment and tools, and to shape up physically as well. Finally, I recommended that he refrain from entering the Dungeon alone, and suggested he team up with a party or someone besides me. If he leveled up to Level 2 or showed off the magic gems he had obtained in the Dungeon, we might just find more allies.

"Okay, okay, I get it," he said, looking sour from all my nagging. "You're thinking about all sorts of stuff for me. But you can't hit me with all this stuff all at once."

“Everything I just said is the bare minimum if you wanna do another dive.”

Thankfully, it seemed he had sensed that every little thing I’d mentioned was all to make sure he didn’t get himself killed. While he looked less than enthused about it, he still heard me out earnestly.

Afterward, I continued looking after Dia up until it was time to work. I couldn’t help him in the Dungeon without any MP left, but everything I could think to do to keep Dia alive, I did. If I’d been thinking purely in terms of personal gain, that was doubtless going overboard. While Dia was an invaluable resource to me, it was putting the cart before the horse to cut into the time I needed for myself, and I wasn’t unaware of that. It was simple—I’d grown attached. If I considered things coldly, Dia was a tool for the using. And if it came down to it, it’d serve me to use him as a decoy, so I could live another day.

But he was also the first person my age I’d formed a connection with in this world. More than anything, we’d explored the Dungeon and overcome the same dangers as a party, and I felt an affinity for him. It wouldn’t be a stretch to call him my first *friend* here. For better or worse, I’d found a foothold in this alien world.

For better or worse...

Chapter 3: The Slaves of Dreams and the Dreams of Slaves

After Dia and I finished our Dungeon dive, my EXP had increased by around 100 points. I needed around 600 more to level up. Taking several hours to get 100 EXP was such a slow rate of growth I could yawn. However, given that experienced divers around age thirty tended to be at or around Level 10, my growth rate could be called quite rapid. In any case, if I did the same thing for six more days, I'd reach Level 5. Presumably, it'd take me less than a year to catch up to those who had fought for a decade or more. Thinking about it that way, I was, in fact, growing abnormally quickly. But that was looking at it in relative terms, and I wasn't satisfied with it. My goal was to clear the Dungeon all the way down to the *hundredth* floor. The whole idea would be out of the question if I didn't push past human limitations at the very *least*. I kicked my gamer-think into high gear, and, bit by bit, I formulated a plan to get me there.

First, I'd gather everything I needed for more worthwhile Dungeon exploration. There was a lot that I, in my inexperience, didn't know or understand, but what I sensed for the first time during my dive with Dia was the importance of sustainability. I'd concluded our dive having lost no HP but fully exhausted my MP. That is to say, if I had a way to recover or save on MP, I could fight for longer. That would help to raise the efficiency by which I earned EXP.

Second, the method by which I hunted monsters of a rank that complemented my party's power level would be of the essence as well. Since Dia's firepower was currently excessive, it was important to challenge stronger monsters and improve our EXP and financial gain. It was the same old story—the gist was prioritizing resource recovery and carefully selecting one's hunting grounds for farming. That was the most basic of basics when it came to leveling up for online games.

"I know what I've got to figure out," I muttered to myself.

"What's that, hon?" asked Ms. Lyen. "What do you gotta figure out?"

“Oh, I just started Dungeon diving again, is all. I was thinking to myself how important it’ll be to learn what sorts of monsters I can find where.”

The workers at the pub had a deep pool of knowledge regarding the Dungeon to draw on. I expected them to give me advice of some sort, so I saw no need to conceal my thoughts.

“Wow, you already tackled it again? Didn’t you say you’d hit a wall?”

“Since I’m free in the morning, when I have time on my hands, I wind up heading back to the Dungeon in the end.”

“Well, I guess you did travel all the way to Vart to do the Dungeon. Ain’t nothing else to be done, I suppose.”

“I’ll make sure I don’t get injured, ma’am. I wouldn’t want to hurt the business.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” she replied warmly. “You can put your dreams before the business! The pub will go on somehow or another, don’t you worry. Leaving that aside, you were saying something about the monsters earlier, but—”

“Leave all that talk to me, Sieg!” It was Mr. Krowe, a diver I had something of a bond with.

“Are you knowledgeable about monsters?” I asked.

“Yeah. I may not look it, but I’ve been diving for a long time. If there’s anything you wanna ask, lay it on me.”

I turned to face Ms. Lyeen. She was nodding without a word. Apparently, she’d been meaning to refer me to Mr. Krowe from the beginning.

“Okay, I’ll take you up on your kind offer. I’d like to ask you about the stronger monsters.”

“The stronger ones? You mean the *bosses*?”

At the word “bosses,” my gamer self threatened to vault out from deep inside me. But I pulled the reins on my curiosity and continued conversing calmly.

“Those, yes. I’d like to know more about the relatively stronger monsters that appear on the lower levels, including the bosses.”

“All right, I get ya! Knowing the monsters you need to watch out for from the outset *is* important, after all! Damn, you’ve got potential, you know that?”

I responded with a wry smile. I couldn’t exactly tell him that I wasn’t asking in order to watch out for those monsters, but rather to crush them outright.

“Listen up, Sieg. There aren’t that many bosses that appear on the first floor. If I recall correctly, there are around ten different kinds. I’m pretty sure the one that’s the closest to the Vart entrance is called the Forest Queen. Keep an eye out if you enter an area that’s got plants growing everywhere. That’s where the thing lives. There are lots of other insectoid bosses apart from it too. There are annoying ones like the kingpin of the giant spiders, the Rail Arachne, and the carnivorous plant Caps Dungeonhole...”

Mr. Krowe volunteered all this information despite the Dungeon being his bread and butter. Thinking back, I owed the guy a lot. Now I understood why the pub’s customers were fond of him. He was the caring big brother type.

He’d told me a ton about the bosses of the lower floors when something else sprang into his mind. “...and lastly, when you’re talking the stronger monsters, there’re the *Guardians*.”

“Guardians?” That was the first I’d heard of the term.

“Yep. They’re the mega-bosses that appear on the tenth and twentieth floors.”

“The tenth floor, huh? So I won’t have to deal with them just yet, right?”

“Well, that’s not necessarily the case. The Guardians have high-level intelligence, and they prowl around the Dungeon freely. So you might bump into one on the lower floors too.”

“Bosses wander around freely?”

“Yeah. Let me warn you, if you do bump into one, run. Nobody can beat those things. They’re absolute beasts that the strongest divers in the Alliance challenged and couldn’t take down.”

“Noted.” Not that I needed to be told to run. If I ever encountered one, I’d obviously turn tail.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare ya. They may prowl around, but you’re still probably never gonna meet one. I can’t even remember the last time I heard somebody did. They’re the stuff of legend among us divers.”

“No, thank you very much. It was all very interesting.”

“If you think that’s interesting, wait till you get a load of this! Let me tell ya about when the strongest diver in all the Alliance, Glenn, fought a Guardian. It’s practically folklore among us divers—”

“KROWE! Don’t hog the man for so bloody long!” came my boss’s angry bellow from inside the kitchen, as per usual. “Otherwise, I’ll toss ya out on your ass for obstructing business!”

“Hold up, boss! I was just giving him the lowdown outta the kindness of my heart!” Mr. Krowe retorted, clearly enjoying this. “I’ll tell ya some other time,” he told me with a wink.

I smiled and bowed my head in appreciation. Mr. Krowe really was a bro to rely on. After that, I returned to work, processing the information I’d attained in my head. And though I was soon swamped by a large number of customers, I’d succeeded in collecting the information I wanted.



The next day, Dia and I started our second-ever tandem Dungeon dive. The night prior, I’d asked my boss some questions as well, deepening my knowledge of the stronger monsters one might come across in the Dungeon. Having learned which enemies we could and couldn’t handle using our abilities, I estimated which monsters would yield us the most EXP.

Dia and I rendezvoused at the church, and I explained my plan of action. “So, yeah, today we’ll be taking aim at high-rank or boss monsters.”

“Oho, bosses, huh? I’m down! I’m super down!” said Dia, the picture of enthusiasm.

“I looked into solutions for the MP problem, but it seems tricky, so I think we need to raise the quality of the battles we fight.”

“I totally agree! We came this far, so let’s do a boss!”

As I suspected, Dia was not too happy about the one-sided weakling massacre the day before. I reckoned a desire to fight stronger enemies had welled up within him.

“Cool. I’m diving a bit deep, so follow me.”

“Got it.”

Going on the information I’d obtained at the pub, we walked toward the area said to house a boss monster. I endeavored to be careful about my MP usage on the way there. I couldn’t afford to ease up on my enemy radar, but I resolved to avoid using *Dimension* for fights with low-ranked monsters to the best of my ability.

We progressed through the Dungeon, picking battles with monsters we could fell with ease. Little by little, the corridors changed appearance, going from nondescript stone to verdure brimming with life. The corridors gradually grew in size, with trees growing with increasing abundance. By the time we ventured yet deeper, it was a full-blown forest. The road became indiscernible, the dense, dark forest stretching as far as the eye could see—proof we’d entered the special area in the depths of the first floor.

“Okay, so we’ve entered the special bug area. Now then, I’d like to snipe the area’s master,” I declared like it was no big thing, “the boss monster ‘Forest Queen.’”

“Wha?” Dia was baffled. I had told him we’d be shooting monsters from a place of safety whenever possible, but he probably hadn’t thought we’d be doing that for bosses too.

“We’re sniping it. Y’know, shooting it from afar.”

“Hold on, Sieg. You said we’d be sniping things when it seemed possible. Are you saying we can aim from here that easily?”

“Let me explain the battle plan.”

“Wait, huh?”

The sight of Dia in such a dither was cuter than I might have imagined, so I didn’t stop to hear him out and just continued with my explanation, telling him

about the strategy I'd put together based on the information I'd absorbed from many a Dungeon diver.

"If it's as I'm told, we can pinpoint the boss's location even from this far away. I want you to fire your spell full force in the direction I point. The boss'll probably die instantly. We wanna pick up the items it drops too, so we'll pick off the small fry hangers-on while they're still a fair distance away. I don't think we'll come into contact with the enemy, but if we do, I'll play decoy. If that happens, I'll fight using my MP without restraint, so you'd need to provide support for me. And that's the plan. Given our abilities, it should be a cinch for us. Any questions?"

"C-Can we really do it?"

"Yep. I know we can."

I was exaggerating so as not to put undue pressure on him, but it was also true that the plan would be easy given our abilities. That was how out of the ordinary our skills were. If a normal adventurer had been there with us, this strategy wouldn't have held. It was only possible thanks to my making an ally out of Dia, and only Dia, by means of my power to see the talents of others. I was struck once again by the amazingness of my ability to view others' talents through my menu-sight.

"Okay. I do owe you," said Dia, "and I trust you." He threw out his chest, attempting to make his dainty body appear bigger.

"No need to get all antsy like that. If everything goes as I think it will, this'll be a walk in the park. You'll see once it's over and done. Your magic's just that crazy strong," I said, spurring him on so as to lighten his mental load.

My partner in crime nodded, blushing slightly. "R-Really? Okay."

"Good. All right, you wait a second while I detect the enemy."

Using *Layered Dimension*, I stretched my area of perception toward the area about which I'd procured my information. Expanding my senses as I pushed through the foliage, I spotted a five-meter-long monster with its back against a giant tree. It was bipedal, with butterfly-like wings and crustacean-like armor. Prowling in its vicinity were several monsters that appeared to be its minions. I

pointed in their direction. With *Dimension*, I could grasp the space they were in at the millimeter level. Barring any calculation errors, we'd be shooting the Forest Queen right in her guts.

"Found it. Put your arm on top of mine. Then fire your spell in the direction I'm pointing. You don't have to worry about stuff like the wind or things being in the way. Not much can impact your magic one way or the other, and if there's anything that looks like it can, I'll adjust for you."

A pause. "Okay." Though still disoriented, Dia did as told and put his arm on top of mine, over my shoulder from behind.

"The target's not moving. As long as we don't get too close, it won't do much of anything. You can fire when ready, but try not to burn my arm."

"It's okay; I can fire right away." He closed his eyes and began focusing. A few seconds later, he opened his eyes and shouted. "Here I go! *Flame Arrow!*"

There was a flash of light. Feeling the heat, I immediately withdrew my arm. Using *Dimension*, I could perceive how the beam of heat bored holes through the trees. I also sensed it had seared through the Forest Queen's throat.

Title unlocked: Associate of the Green

+0.05 to VIT

I had been actually gunning for its guts, but the beam had fired a tad off target, and it appeared the hit had landed on the monster's throat. All the same, our target perished instantly, decapitated. Clearly, when Dia fired his magic with all his power, it skewed slightly upward.

I checked our status menus even as I watched the Forest Queen fade away. A vast quantity of EXP had been added to our counts, split evenly between us. I didn't know the specifics behind EXP sharing, but it appeared as though on a basic level, it was distributed evenly among a group of collaborators. I smiled, gloating, as I went about the next thing to do. It had all gone just as expected.

"And that's that. Boss defeated. Next, let's go beat the minions in the vicinity. Scratch that; it looks like they're just running around in a state of confusion, not

knowing where we are. Let's change tack and beat the fewest enemies we need to secure the item drops."

"Wait, it's already over, just like that?" Dia looked incredulous that the "battle" had ended so abruptly.

"It's over. The end. C'mon, let's walk, but not too fast. I intend to avoid monster encounters as much as possible, but I think we'll have to fight a little, so get ready." I scanned the area where the item drops lay. Half of the minions were on the hunt for the one who had sniped their master, while the other half remained in the area.

Dia and I advanced through the forest, avoiding enemies as we went and crushing the monsters that occasionally appeared through our usual teamwork. It took around ten minutes to reach the place where the items the boss had dropped were located, around a few hundred meters away. We kept having to take detours, so it took longer than I'd anticipated.

After a thorough safety check, we set our sights on three minion monsters that were waiting on standby, coordinating our snipe shot via eye contact. The first died instantly without being able to do anything. The other two seemed to pick up on the direction whence the spell was fired and made a beeline for us. I made Dia do the same thing again. We aimed at one of the monsters approaching us in a straight line and fired. A hole was blazed into it before it could reach us.

I engaged the last of the three with my sword. Minion monsters were higher-rank than the area's standard roster. Reluctant as I was, I was forced to fight.

"Dimension: Calculash!"

If you asked us, this close-quarters fight with the last of them *was* the boss fight. The monster resembled a praying mantis. Its two arms were sharp blades, which it swung down swiftly and nimbly. I eyed its movements and shifted my body to dodge its attacks. Before I could take a breath, the mantis's other arm-blade sliced up from below. I fended it off using the flat of my sword, then kicked the mantis's torso to distance myself from it.

That was when I knew I'd won. It had no special attacks to outwit me with. It simply slashed and slashed. It showed no indication of targeting Dia, charging at

me in a suicide rush. I went on the defensive to buy Dia time.

“*Flame Arrow!*”

The moment I distanced myself from it again, the mantis’s head went flying.

“Whew...”

“Are you okay, Sieg? That bug was crazy fast!”

It was certainly a monster with sharp and speedy attacks, but truthfully, I hadn’t felt like I’d end up the loser in a one-on-one battle with it. That was how immense the power of *Dimension* was. Its ability to allow me to grasp the space around me exhibited its unmatched might in close-quarters combat as well.

“What, that thing? I had it under control and then some. And with that, we’re done.”

“Really? Good; that’s a relief.”

Dia and I started retrieving the item drops. We secured the boss’s magic gem and the items it naturally dropped. Then all we had left to do was escape the area, paying attention so as not to run into any more of the minion monsters. Cautiously, we made our way to the Pathway Proper, and upon reaching it, our safety was guaranteed. I checked my MP to find I had over half of my total MP remaining.

“All right, what say we go beat the next boss?”

“Wait, there’s a next one?”

“If we’re talking ones nearby, I guess that’d be the settlement of goblins. They’re bipedal, and apparently there are giant ones among them, so let’s go take ’em down.”

“Okay, sure,” said Dia as he turned over the magic gem the Forest Queen had dropped in the palm of his hand.

We headed for the area I’d heard about and repeated the process, which was all it took to defeat the next boss in short order.

Title unlocked: Poltroon’s Brawn.

+0.05 to STR.

“Honestly though, this isn’t how I pictured my Dungeon dive,” said Dia.

“I know what you mean. But given our abilities, this is the safest and most efficient way to do it, so...”

A combat style that wholly relied on unique abilities and an abnormally potent magic stat led to encounters that were far removed from ordinary battles. Yet we continued to employ this technique. That way, we could utterly stomp boss monsters we’d normally have to risk our lives to take down without even fighting them head-on. There was nothing to complain about.

That day, Dia and I defeated a total of three bosses before exiting the Dungeon.

Title unlocked: Overrun.

+0.05 to STR.



We exclusively took down powerful monsters and accumulated EXP in the most efficient way I could come up with. I’d piled up plenty of EXP, so we returned to town with energy to spare. On the road back, Dia, who’d become drenched, wrung the hem of his clothes as he walked.

“Son of a... Stupid bug, getting me all wet... Oh well, I guess it’ll dry on the way.”

Our boss monster farming had gone smoothly for the first two bosses, but the third’s habitat was less than agreeable. During the battle against that boss (a water strider appearing in a marshland pond), Dia had tumbled and fallen to the ground. He insisted it was the boss’s attack, but as I had *Dimension* active, I knew the truth. He had tripped over himself. He may have been a machine when it came to magic, but he left a world to be desired in the physical fitness department. At that moment, I resolved to have Dia move as little as possible.

Which brings us back to the present. Dia was frantically extracting what

moisture he could. He'd been doggedly wringing out the cloth around his waist for quite a while, and I kept catching glimpses of his navel.

The stimulation was fierce, and I couldn't unsee it. The sopping wet clothes were clinging to Dia's form. Normally, his clothes were a bit oversized, so they didn't catch my eye, but not so now. I could clearly make out the feminine outline of his body. And his modest but nonetheless extant bustline.

"Here, Dia. Take my mantle." I tried putting it on him.

Dia just puffed up with pride like a rascally boy. "Don't worry, I'll be fine. This much is nothing."

Did he really intend to hide his sex? I cautioned him in a roundabout way. "But you'll catch a cold like that."

"Ha ha, I'm *fine*, Sieg. Honest. I'd never catch a cold from *this*. I ain't bothered."

"But Dia...if you stay like that...your clothes, they're sticking to you."

"Sticking, to me?" It was then he noticed. He saw his situation with a clear mind, and his face turned red. Then, to gloss over the body thing, he accepted my mantle. "Y-You know what, you're right, I'd hate to snub your generosity! Don't wanna catch a cold!"

He put it on and walked a short distance behind me. For a brief time, an awkward silence hung in the air, and in order to break that atmosphere, I changed the subject.

"Ah, I just remembered, Dia. There're a bunch of stalls over there. We've got money to spend now, so what say we go check 'em out?"

"Sweet! Let's go! You never know, we might find some gems!"

At an open square located away from the road lay an assortment of vendor's stalls. From what I'd been told, novice artisans and workmen were selling their respective wares at low prices there. In addition, there were apparently people dumping stuff they'd picked up in the Dungeon by selling them on the cheap. It wouldn't hurt to search for arms and armor at nonestablished stores as well. With my menu-sight, it was impossible to rip me off, so I could zero in on value

deals without cause for concern.

Still blushing red, Dia scurried up to the stalls like a small woodland creature. “Look, Sieg, there’s tons here that’s perfect for us!” He animatedly beckoned me over.

“Yep, coming. Just give me a second.”

I ran after him, musing over how endearing the sight of him excitedly taking to the stalls was. Dia was clearly enjoying himself, gleefully asking me my opinion on various items for sale. Each time, I appraised those wares with my menu-sight, evaluating their worth aloud. The prices were hard to beat, but that meant much of the stuff on offer had deteriorated in quality. I found precious little that was up to snuff. But it was better that way. We could window shop while chatting about harmless fluff. The awkward atmosphere from before was gone now. Besides, I was having fun searching for hidden gems using my menu-sight. There were even times I left Dia alone and wandered off to look at the goods by myself.

“Hrmm...”

“So you can appraise goods too?” asked Dia wonderingly. “You’re looking at stuff super closely.”

“I guess you could say I’m just that well-informed.”

“Wow, you know about a whole bunch of stuff.” He gazed at me with respect. Little did he know that my “expert evaluations” were thanks solely to my menu-sight. It felt like I was pulling the wool over an innocent kid’s eyes, which made me a bit uncomfortable. I was enveloped by a sense of guilt I hadn’t been counting on. My eyes darted this way and that, searching for a way to change the subject, and that was when I found what I was looking for.

【HAIRCLIP OF I’LIA】

An accessory containing a magic gem of light. Slightly boosts the user’s magic power.

This item was labeled with a proper name, and it was going for cheap despite

that. It was lying in a nook inside a stall in a corner of the square. I didn't hesitate to grab it. "Excuse me, sir, I'll take it."

"Hello. That'll be five pieces o' copper."

I promptly produced the copper pieces from inside my leather bag; the sensation wasn't unlike that feeling when you obtain a rare item in a video game. I examined the freshly purchased Hairclip of I'lia, a huge grin on my face. The hairclip was pretty, its white magic gem gleaming.

"Hey Sieg, is that thing a good get?"

"Yeah, I know for a fact it's worth more than five copper coins."

The proper-noun items I'd seen up until that point were all pricey. The lowest they should reasonably go for was one silver coin.

"Man, I personally can't see any difference whatsoever. You've got a great eye."

"Heh heh. I sniffed out a fantastic deal."

"But are you gonna put that thing on, Sieg?"

"Huh?"

It was then it dawned on me. It was a hairclip. No matter how you sliced it, it was an accessory for use by women and girls.

"I don't think it'd look good on you, Sieg."

"Uh, actually, this is a present for you, Dia." I couldn't admit I'd only bought it because I was caught up in how much of a bargain it was, so out of desperation, I proffered the hairclip to Dia.

"Wha? It's for me?"

"You've got your hair tied in the back. If you put it in there, I think it'd look good on you."

"N-No way, dude! Wait up a sec! I don't need something like that! It'd never look good on me!"

"But if you don't want it...what do I do with it? It's such a quality item, what with the magic gem in it and everything," I said, expressing my disappointment

(albeit a little theatrically). Dia got flustered, and I pressed the assault. “I thought it’d be perfect on you, since it apparently boosts magic power...but oh well. Guess I’ll go return it to the vendor later. Ah, shoot, but what’ll I do if he doesn’t take it back?”

“All right, all right! I’ve just gotta take it, then!”

“Excellent. C’mon, come over here.” I placed the Hairclip of I’lia in Dia’s hair. With that, the purchase was no longer a waste of money. Filled with a gamery satisfaction, I nodded my approval.

Dia looked ill at ease, and he looked up at me. “Hey, it... It looks weird on me, right?”

“Nope. It looks great on you.”

“Th-That can’t be true...” Embarrassed, he started walking ahead as though to run away, His ponytail was bouncing like an actual pony’s tail. The touch of color the Hairclip of I’lia provided his golden mane with only amplified Dia’s attractiveness. For Dia’s sake, I won’t elaborate whether that was attractiveness as a guy or a girl.

“You’re not gonna buy anything, Dia?”

“I’m good. I dunno what’s good or not.”

“You don’t have to buy only stuff that’s objectively good, you know. You can buy stuff you just like too. You’ve just started making money as an adventurer, so you can think of it as commemorative.”

“Commemorative, huh? All right, then, guess I’ll get a book, maybe.”

I was surprised. A book? *Come to think of it, I’ve never talked to him about anything besides the Dungeon. This is the perfect way to get to know each other.*

“Then let’s go look for books. What kinda books do you like?”

“Hmm, well, I’d like adventure stories if possible. Dungeon diving stories, heroic tales, that sorta thing.”

We visited shops all around the square, discussing what we liked all the while. I could feel the distance between us closing, however gradually. We’d certainly

grown closer—for better or for worse.

Then, after we'd stopped at nearly every stall in the square, Dia finally asked. Compared to his expression during the idle talk we'd been engaged in up until then, he looked more serious.

"Hey, man, I've been wondering this whole time, but why'd you decide to Dungeon dive?"

"Huh? What do you mean, why? To live."

"To live? But you're so skilled; I don't think you need to earn money through the Dungeon. You've even got a job at a pub right now, and you can cook."

It was so sudden, I got whiplash. "That's true, but I need to Dungeon dive regardless. How should I put it? I need it so I can live as my true self."



I needed to clear the Dungeon so I could live as Aikawa Kanami. I wasn't "Siegfried." My name wasn't that stupid and fakey. That was the answer to his question, but he wouldn't have understood, so my reply turned abstract.

"So you can live as your true self..."

"Speaking of which, what about you, Dia?"

"Oh, it's nothing special. I just want money."

Now that he mentioned it, he had said he wanted money and power before. Obviously, he abided by that guiding principle in his life without any second thoughts, given how unhesitatingly he replied.

"Oh yeah, you did say you want money and power. How come? Why money and power?"

"As long as you've got both, you can get whatever you want. Glory, status, women, food, freedom, happiness—everything just as you like," he said resentfully.

I sensed a deep-seated grudge or fixation in him. Something in his past had made him obsessed with wealth and power.

"That's a pretty unrefined dream..."

"You may be right. But that's the stuff us guys' dreams are made of, right?"

"Uh, not sure I'd agree with that..."

"Oh, I'm sure it's what you want, somewhere in your heart. Having money to burn, living in a luxurious mansion, waited on by sexy ladies, eating tasty food. Those are the sorts of things guys crave."

"Is that right?"

Perhaps because of the values inculcated in my world, I didn't have a favorable opinion of such desires. For one, lovely homes and delicious food were a matter of course. It occurred to me that maybe the reason spiritual and emotional contentment were emphasized over materialism, and that I was raised to believe there were things more important than money or indulging one's greed, was simply because I'd lived in a world that was sheltered and

safe.

“Where I’m from, whoever’s got money and power can do as they please,” said Dia, launching into a vigorous harangue. “Thanks to his private army, nobody could oppose him. He was the lord, so he could rob the people of the fief blind. He took full advantage of his wealth and kept pretty-faced slaves. He could live while indulging his every whim, and he seemed happier than anyone else. There’re great stinking swarms of rat finks like him in this country too. Nobles, local ruling families, dudes who struck it rich in the Dungeon—the so-called ‘moneyed elites.’ And I’m gonna join ‘em. I’m gonna use that power to make sure nobody can oppose me. If I can do that, then everybody will acknowledge me! I’ll go that far to make everyone see me for *me*—I’ll be able to live my life as a boy named ‘Dia.’”

I had perhaps misjudged Dia. I’d viewed him as a kid who kept putting on airs to cover up his lack of competence, yet in reality, he had a solid core to him. He’d fixed his gaze on a goal, and he was unwavering in his pursuit of it, which was admirable.

“I see. You’re amazing, Dia.”

“Oh, not at all; I’m not amazing in any way. I haven’t got either money or power yet, and I know it’s thanks to you I’m getting anywhere.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

Dia must have thought he’d let too much slip in his fired-up state, because he scratched his head sheepishly. I’d felt the true timbre of his heart up close, and I... I got vertigo. His words had a punch to them. He was another human being, living his own life. His speech had been powerful enough to drill that into me.

“Sieg, you okay? You’re looking kinda pale there.”

I stood there. “It’s nothing. I’m fine,” I muttered, wringing the words out.

*Don’t ask people about their hopes and dreams in a stupid fantasy world.
Don’t get too close to them.*

If I came into close enough contact with someone’s stark humanity, it would put cracks in my gamery ethos of optimizing progress. I was keen to abort this conversation with Dia. I parted ways with him, telling him it was because I

didn't have MP.

"Cool! See ya, Sieg!"

"Yep, see ya."

Dia waved energetically as he walked away. He seemed pumped for the next day. I, on the other hand, was feeling disheartened. Dragging my feet, I walked around town alone. I had the EXP to level up, but I didn't head for a church. I felt like simply walking. Up until then, I'd spared no thought for anything but the Dungeon. Looking around town? For the Dungeon. Gathering information? For the Dungeon. Working? For the Dungeon. But now, I just wanted to take in the town without thinking about the damn Dungeon.

Maybe it was because I'd come into contact with Dia's raw emotions. I'd started to develop an interest in the people passing me by. Where had that boy carrying the sword on his back been born? What did he wish to accomplish in life? A semifer woman was next to pass me by. What was her story? Her personality? What was her goal? What was she walking for? In my heart of hearts, I'd looked down on these people as NPCs, but now I understood each and everyone was a flesh-and-blood person just like me.

That was the fact that had been too dangerous for me to let sink in. My vertigo worsened, and I grew nauseous. I was losing my cool.

I couldn't acknowledge it. If I did, then everything I'd squared off into the it's-a-game part of my head would flip over. This unreality started to feel real, and the real unreal. The boundary lines blurred, and foreign contaminants mixed more and more into the brain area that held what I valued and cherished.

It felt like I was becoming someone else in Aikawa Kanami's—

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

But that's just how it is...

No matter the world, its residents were all living, breathing people, each leading their own lives. They all had their own stories, and were just as rich as the people of my world. There was no such thing as an NPC. I had to accept that and move on.

I watched the people come and go. They were all full of energy and life. There were happy people and unhappy people. And knowing that couldn't be without its benefits. Now I was equipped with not just the insight afforded me by the ability to see their gamey stats, but also the knowledge that the information I could obtain from the subtleties of their expressions was also important.

With that thought in mind, I made my way to a place I hadn't been before and surveyed the diverse crowds of people. While I was at it, I went through the leveling up process at the church, as my mood had lifted. I also did some shopping for stuff it was logical for me to buy using the money I had left. I walked wherever I fancied. Thanks to "???" I didn't stop in my tracks, moseying around town in high spirits just like Dia.

From time to time, I happened to catch sight of people in chains and chokers, which clinked as they walked. Dia *had* made mention of slaves as though they were an everyday aspect of this world. Slaves had existed in my world's history as well. I supposed the history of slavery in this world wasn't much different.

As I stared blankly at them, a huge lead for clearing the Dungeon occurred to me. I smiled wryly at myself for making everything about the Dungeon, but I was nonetheless enchanted by their sheer utility. It was simple—use a slave to clear the Dungeon. I could discern which slaves had talents suited to Dungeon diving using my menu-sight. It behooved me to detect the slaves' respective abilities and make them progress through it for me. The plan was impulsive, but it was also worth looking into.

I walked toward the rough part of Vart, on the hunt for a place that might have information. I spotted a carriage containing what appeared to be slaves, and I used *Dimension* to ascertain the wagon's destination. It proceeded down a deserted back alley through a subterranean tunnel. After some walking, a modest door came into view. It was the sort of building you probably wouldn't

find unless you knew where it was beforehand.

I peeked inside using *Dimension* and discovered it was a slave auction site. I didn't have much MP left, so I couldn't see into the back. I set my eyes on the person in charge of receiving customers at the entrance and entered the building from the front door, pretending to be just another customer.

"Why, hello there, sir. What business might you have here this early?" He was a sharply dressed man, and he bowed as he greeted me.

"The place was recommended to me. I just came to give it a once-over," I replied arrogantly, playing the part of the kind of guy I figured had the financial means to be able to visit this place despite his relative youth. In this world, there were many who had achieved massive success at a young age. As long as I kept up that attitude, I knew I wouldn't be thought suspicious.

First things first, I'd exercise my silver tongue and gather information. My multiple Dungeon dives had imbued me with confidence. If it came to blows and I focused on fleeing, even that would present no issues.

"I see. However, we're only open late at night, and I'm afraid there's not much to see here while the sun yet shines."

"That so? In that case, could you tell me how things are done here, so I know for tonight?"

"Of course, sir, I'd love to."

I thought I might be treated curtly as a customer who did something other than give them money, but surprisingly, he readily allowed me to ask him questions. Perhaps they could extract some coin from any given customer.

I began talking to the man so as not to be thought suspicious, and I observed the vicinity even as I gathered information. Within the confines of *Dimension's* area of effect, I could make out the slaves I'd detected inside the carriage earlier. They were in the middle of tidying their appearances. In order to look good for the customers, they were bathing, putting on makeup, and prettying up with accessories and the like. There were over ten slaves in chains. I obtained information from the client-facing man as I observed how slaves were treated in this world.

It wasn't long before a slave appeared in the lobby with us. Thanks to *Dimension*, I knew she had strayed off. She was a black-haired little girl, and she had been roaming around this large mansion by herself that whole time. Her black eyes were hollow, and she was skin and bones. I surmised she hadn't been gussied up yet, since she was unkempt and dressed in cloth rags.

"Is that girl over there a slave?" I asked, already knowing the answer. I used *Analyze* on her right away to get a rough look at her stats.

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria Distrus

HP: 39/41

MP: 35/35

CLASS: Slave

LEVEL 3

STR 0.89

VIT 2.01

DEX 1.23

AGI 0.73

INT 1.07

MAG 1.91

APT 1.52

CONDITION: Confusion 0.56, Languor 1.02

【SKILLS】

INHERENT SKILLS: Perception 1.43

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Hunting 0.67, Cooking 1.07

The girl had three skills on top of her uncommon magic power. Her overall talent was slightly above average. Then again, compared to Dia and me, there

was a world of difference.

The girl was the first to respond. “Uh, I... I’m...”

The color returned to her vacant eyes, and she looked at me. I got the impression she’d found whatever she’d been looking for.

“Ah, my apologies! Hey, someone take that slave inside!” The man clapped his hands to summon someone from the back.

Despite that, the slave girl continued looking at me. “I’m Maria,” she managed. “My name is Maria.”

Her wisp of a voice was a feeble murmur. But while we weren’t that close together, I could still hear her loud and clear. Her sudden self-introduction caught me by surprise. I found myself stating my name as well, perhaps due to the social convention I was used to back in my world.

“I’m Sieg.”

Then I realized my blunder. Not one good thing could come of my divulging my name in a place like this. I could make excuses by saying it was all so sudden, but I’d still let my guard down.

Someone came from the back to take her away, but she kept staring at me even as she was led inside. And for some reason or other, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I didn’t want to guess what those eyes of hers wanted.

The man wiped his brow. “I deeply apologize for that shameful display, sir.”

“No, that’s all right.”

I was more shaken than I’d have expected. The composure “???” had so graciously granted me lay in tatters. Maybe the place had gotten me too nervous, and maybe I was still exhausted from my Dungeon diving. In any case, I was able to confirm that I could see the stats of the slaves. That meant I could look for slaves with useful talents without a hitch the next time I came.



Shouldn't stay here any longer than this.

"Now, allow me to explain—" the man tried to continue.

"No, that's all right. I'll leave it there for today. I found out what I wanted to know."

"I see. Then we eagerly await your next visit, sir."

I turned my back on the fellow bowing so deferentially and fled the establishment. I'd managed to obtain valuable information about slaves, and in the end my misadventure had yielded only good results. Yet I felt like dirt.

I exited the dim, gloomy back alley and slipped back onto the streets. Before I knew it, the sun had sunk down. I was out of time, so I headed to the pub for work. For some reason, my steps felt heavy. No, I take that back—I knew full well why. I'd gotten carried away and let the people of this world get too close. As my reward, I had encountered a girl I should never have run across.

No matter how many times my "???" skill activated, my gamer-think was slowly but steadily melting away. Or, more accurately, reality and "fantasy" were becoming decompartmentalized. And I found myself giving my world more than a passing thought even as I struggled in this one, and even though I knew it wouldn't help me.

I suppressed my wavering heart and plodded forward like my life depended on it. I begged to be allowed to go on thinking of everything as a game for just a little while longer, but that was not to be. The thoughts I'd endeavored not to dwell on came bubbling up into my mind. That black-haired, black-eyed little girl had dealt the killing blow. Those empty eyes. That lifeless hair. That emaciated body. That piece of cloth they called clothing. Everything about her reminded me of the apple of my eye.

I reached the pub and tried to dispel the memories floating up by pouring all my might into my work, but if I dwelled on it for a second, I couldn't escape the flood. After getting off work, I went straight to my corner of the building and slid under my blanket.

I wanted to avoid squandering activations of "???" if possible. I'd already relied on it once that day. As such, I emptied my mind. If I could just fall asleep,

I'd be freed of the feelings doggedly chasing me. If I could make it through the night, my turmoil would subside a little. *That's just human nature.* Or so I told myself before closing my eyes.

Frantically, I took refuge in sleep. My consciousness faded, as though I were descending toward the bottom of a deep lake. But flee, flee, flee as I might—it closed in on me in my dreams.



The dream I dreamed was a dream, but also, it was a squaring up of memories past. Evidently, the events I experienced in my world came back to me in dream form. However, the memories weren't reproduced without some fuzziness. As might be expected of a dream, the visions contained plenty of static and noise, like a roll of film.

Yet I knew exactly what I was seeing. This dream was my memory of that fateful day. The day the me who lived in that world made up his mind on how he'd go on living. A recollection concerning the roots of Aikawa Kanami.

On that day, I was in a hospital room, opposite my beloved little sister. She was smiling amiably. My one and only sister in the whole wide world—Aikawa Hitaki. A girl with long black locks, and my pride and joy. She spoke so politely, she could even be called a yamato nadeshiko.

Hitaki's body was almost as white as the bed on which she was sitting. She moved her sickly, thin white arms and crinkled her immaculately white hospital robe, brushing up her black hair. Her jet-colored tresses contrasted so harshly against her snow-white skin that it was almost criminal how nice it looked in this pocket of space called a hospital. Her flowing black locks were that dignified, that impeccable.

I heard Hitaki speak, her voice like the tinkle of a bell. "Kanami...you came to see me today too?"

"Of course. From now on, I'm gonna visit every day."

That shouldn't have been surprising. Hitaki was ill. And I was the source of that sickness. There was no way I'd fail to come see her.

"Every day? *You*, Kanami? I could be wrong, but are pigs flying outside?" She

chuckled softly.

“Yep. From here on out, I’m gonna be by your side,” I vowed earnestly, undaunted by her sarcastic comment.

“But you can’t play the video games you love so much here. You don’t mind that?”

“Yeah, that does suck. But I can take it. I mean, I’m all you’ve got. I don’t got the time to be playing video games. I’m gonna protect you from here on out. I’m gonna protect you, just you watch!”

On that day, the entities known as our parents vanished from our family. We erased them. And the Kanami family became a single pair of siblings. Which was the reason I decided she would now be the most precious thing in the world to me and vice versa.

“Really, Kanami? From here on out...”

“Yep. I’ll protect you. I’ll be here for you forever.”

Up until that day, I hadn’t been able to do so much as the bare minimum as her brother. I’d run away from the conceptual unit known as the Aikawa Family and treated not just my parents but even my little sister as “that which isn’t there.” She had soldiered on all that time alone, and yet I, the older sibling, escaped from it all. It was pitiful and deplorable of me. I had to atone.

“I’m happy to hear that...at long last...you finally see me...”

Trembling, Hitaki placed her hands on her chest, and her eyes teared up. Her sheer frailty was hard to watch, but I wouldn’t permit myself to avert my gaze. After all, I was the one who had driven her to this state. It was none other than her big brother who’d damaged her. I held her quivering body in my arms and hugged her. I’d be there for her until her tears stopped, until her shaking stopped, until the sadness was healed.

Hitaki listened to my heartbeat, and gently, she opened her petite lips. The way she spoke, she seemed relieved to her core. “So we’re together forever now... I’m so happy...”

“I promise. Together forever.”

That was the promise I had made to her. Together forever. And that was everything to me—to the kid named Aikawa Kanami, not Siegfried Vizzita, resident of this fantasy world.

And yet...

If I wake from this dream, we'll stop being together.

I knew I'd be pulled back to reality. The reality where we were separated across worlds, me alone here, and her alone in my original world. Come what may, I absolutely, positively needed to return to that world—even if the attempt cost me my life. Without me, my invalid sister wouldn't be able to keep on living. My tender and kind sister, meeting an unhappy end due to some illness? Not on my watch. I was the only one allowed to suffer that kind of sorrow. The sooner I effected my great return, the better.

“Mark my words, kiddo, I *will* save you! I'll do anything it takes!”

I extended a hand to her, to the sister I had sworn to protect, but it didn't reach her. Having now acted in a way that conflicted with my memory, the hospital room in my dream became unable to recreate the past. The dream started falling apart, the space breaking away like disconnecting puzzle pieces. The windows and door fell away, as did the lights, the furniture, the ceiling, and the floor. And lastly, the bed, and Hitaki along with it. The dream was engulfed by darkness.

When I awoke, I would probably forget I had ever dreamed this. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to go on living in this world, to keep my composure and explore the Dungeon in a logical fashion. In fact, I might just go insane from the frustration and guilt. I'd probably end up trying to make it all the way to the deepest level of the Dungeon without eating or drinking. That would just be a reckless nosedive without the slightest benefit. It'd be of no use to Hitaki.

I had no choice but to try not to think about her. I had to bottle up Aikawa Kanami and inhabit the skin of Siegfried Vizzita, the boy who thinks about returning to that world and naught else. It couldn't be helped if this was the optimal way to do it.

Any second now, I'd open my eyes. I could sense the darkness attenuating and my awakening approaching. Once I was awake, I'd be alone again. I'd be the lone adventurer Siegfried Vizzita, who sought the deepest level of the fantasy world Dungeon, again. And it would be trying. More than trying; it'd be agony.

Light filled the darkness. I was enveloped in a light that burned my body. And then, I opened my eyes.

I was conscious again—and I was alone again.



The next morning, I was fully awake and began preparing matter-of-factly for another dive. No one important to me was here. I stood alone in this world, so I didn't have the time to be grumbling or complaining.

I went shopping first thing in the morning, loading up on the stuff I needed for the Dungeon. I'd earned a fair amount of money, so I bought arms and armor as well. Then I met up with Dia.

I had a cheap gauntlet equipped on my left arm and a spare sword stored in my inventory. I gave Dia a light chestplate. He declined at first, but I insisted he absolutely needed some investment in defense, and I managed to convince him.

We stopped by the church, where I conducted my pre-Dungeon preparedness checks.

"Sieg! I asked the priest and he said I'm Level 6!" Dia's boyish joy put a smile on my face.

"That's great. For your information, I'm also Level 6." I checked out our stats.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 189/197

MP: 262/262

CLASS:

LEVEL 6

STR 4.12

VIT 4.21

DEX 5.11

AGI 7.24

INT 7.23

MAG 11.43

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 5.31

EXP: 1094/3200

EQUIPMENT: One-Handed Steel Sword, Otherworld Garb,
Largish Cloak, Otherworld Footwear, Leather Gauntlet

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 98/112

MP: 631/631

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 6

STR 3.62

VIT 3.43

DEX 2.14

AGI 2.08

INT 5.67

MAG 34.35

APT 5.00

CONDITION: Protection 1.00

EXP: 321/3200

EQUIPMENT: Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, Hairclip of I'lia, Fine-Quality Cloth Garb, Leather Chestplate, Mantle, Leather Shoes

We'd both rocketed up in level, and all of our stats had risen sharply. I'd spent all my bonus points on MP to increase my staying power. Dia's gains in strength and vitality were a pleasant surprise. His was such a magic-specialized build that I'd thought those stats might never grow at all, so I was a little relieved.

If anything made me uneasy, it was the "Class" section of our menus. Mine was still blank, while Dia's was set to "Swordfighter." Maybe Dia's strength and vitality were up thanks to the benefits of that class. Assuming there were class-related bonuses when one leveled up, I'd wasted six levels' worth of bonuses by not having a class. I wanted to urgently resolve that issue but had yet to make progress on that front. There was nothing about acquiring a class in any books, and asking at the pub was no use; they just asked me if I was talking about jobs or occupations. I asked Dia how he'd become a swordfighter only for him to tell me, "If you hold a sword, you're a swordfighter." I saw patterns regarding what type of person fell into which class, but the specific conditions were lost on me.

While I was pondering the subject, Dia voiced a suggestion. "If we're at Level 6, then I bet we can dive pretty deep. Let's take our time and explore a bunch today."

"Good idea. I'm off work today anyway."

"What, really? You're off?"

"Yeah, for the most part I'm off once every three days. They said they're not open on hihori days."

Hihori. The word was written using the symbols for "sun" and "celebration." If I had to guess, it corresponded with what people back in my world would call Sunday.

“Ah, cool. In that case, let’s see how far we can get after diving for a whole day!”

“I can dig it.”

Given our current levels, I estimated we could fight up until around Floor 10. In truth, our levels were lower than the recommended level for the Floor 10 area and thereabouts. But with the growth rate of our abilities being abnormally high, our skills were just too strong. Despite only being Level 6, our stats were on par with Level 10 adventurers. I suspected the “aptitude” stat was related to that. For me it was 7.00, and for Dia it stood at 5.00.

“All right, let’s get a move on!”

Dia rushed toward the Dungeon triumphantly, and I followed. As we’d be sticking to the Pathway, the section the state had conquered, I saw no problem with Dia leading the way. I walked behind him, feeling like an older sibling watching over a rascally little brother or sister.



“Third floor, baby!”

After about an hour, we’d reached Floor 3. Likely thanks to our stat boosts, we didn’t feel particularly exhausted. In fact, Dia was positively elated.

It was uncommon for monsters to appear on the Pathway, as the state had laid down that road with a barrier for the benefit of the people. I’d gotten hurt because I hadn’t known about the Pathway, so the folks at the pub had informed me about it at length. The Pathway wound through the shortest distance between floors, so as long as one proceeded down it, they’d reach the next floor without difficulty. The Pathway reached all the way to the twenty-third level, marking that as humanity’s current state of progression through the Dungeon. That the Pathway reached that far was thanks to the achievements of a hero named Glenn, the adventurer said to be the strongest among all mankind.

However, in recent years, progress on the Pathway had stagnated. While they’d laid down twenty floors’ worth soon after the Dungeon was born, only three more floors’ worth had been added in the past few years. I kept hearing

how the Dungeon was a wildly different beast starting from Floor 20. For one thing, though they had successfully laid down the Pathway on those floors, it wasn't as though all of the trials and challenges on those floors had been cleared. Even Glenn, the strongest adventurer, hadn't been able to beat the Guardians of the tenth and twentieth floors and was only putting them off. Going by those rumors, the prospects for future Dungeon exploration seemed thorny.

"We can go even deeper too. By my estimate, we'll reach the tenth floor today."

"What, really?!"

"We'll be following the Pathway, so it's no big deal. We'll see the levels of the enemies when we fight one per floor."

"Okay, Sieg. If it's from your mouth, I believe it."

His levels of trust in me seemed oddly high, but since that saved me a ton of trouble, I didn't dwell on it.

"That said, I'll be leading the way soon. It's not like enemies never appear on the Pathway. In a pinch, I need to act as your shield."

"But, uhh, now that I'm Level 6 and all, I was thinking I should show off my sword skills..."

"Sure, you can use the sword up till Floor 5."

"Look, I know I shouldn't, I *know*, but even so, the blade— Wait, hold on, did you say it's okay?!"

"It's fine, up till Floor 5."

I'd considered my response to Dia's sword plea ahead of time. Judging by his Level 6 stats, he could win fights, albeit with my support. His strength stat was already close to 4.00, which was worlds apart from when it was below 1.00. This time, his attacks should inflict damage. One of the pieces of information I'd learned at the pub was that warriors with strength stats between 3.00 to 5.00 could hack it up to Floor 5. That was how important levels and strength stats were.

Besides, if Dia gained experience in close-quarters combat, and I gained experience in long-distance combat, that could only pay dividends down the line.

“Thank you, Sieg!”

“It’s nothing. I just concluded that you shouldn’t face any issues if it’s only up till Floor 5, so—hey, don’t cling to me like that!”

Dia expressed his joy bodily, glomping onto me, and I, disconcerted, shook free of his embrace. Dia had his hair short and claimed to be a boy, but his face was that of a beautiful, fair-skinned girl. If he came too close, I’d stop being able to ignore that fact. Even worse, the glomp reminded me of my little sister, which was my biggest taboo. If I started thinking about her, I’d have trouble suppressing the urge to rush all the way to the hundredth floor, which would serve no purpose. To the best of my ability, I had to try not to be reminded of Hitaki.

For the time being, one floor deeper a day sounded good. I figured I should be pretty satisfied if I could reach the hundredth floor within a year. If I lost my cool and triggered “???” for no reason, or if I pushed my luck recklessly and got seriously wounded, everything would come to nothing. At the very least, I wouldn’t let Aikawa Kanami out of his cage for another year. I was Sieg, the Dungeon diver aiming for the deepest level, and for now it was fine that way.

“Ha ha! All right, now let’s exit the Pathway and fight us some monsters!” Dia cried.

“Wait, I feel like taking a detour like that’ll eat a ton of time.”

“But if we keep to the Pathway until Floor 5, we might never bump into an enemy!”

“Hrmm, I guess it can’t be helped.” I figured it’d take even more time to dissuade a hyped-up Dia, so I reluctantly agreed.

“Off we go!”

Dia left the Pathway to find some monsters. I was right behind him, detecting enemies using *Dimension*. After a few minutes, my radar picked up a presence. It was a large winged fish swimming through the air. The third floor contained

many lakes, rivers, and other bodies of water, so the appearance rate of aquatic monsters was high, with Skyfish being particularly common. I'm pretty sure that if this thing were discovered back in my world, it'd make the news.

"Dia, there's a monster around the next turn. It's called a Skyfish. It's a fish that swims through the air. Be careful not to get bit."

"Got it!"

Frankly, if one was armed with the information, then the fight was decided. To say battles hinged on intel was no exaggeration. I remembered that one line in Sun Tzu or whatever, which made me realize anew how *Dimension* was downright cheating.

"Hi-ya!" At the bend in the path, Dia closed the distance and swung his sword.

The first stroke of his sword was dodged; perhaps he'd overexerted himself. The Skyfish tried to bite its sudden assailant, but Dia blocked it with the flat of his sword. It appeared he could track the Skyfish's movements, no problem. Besides, I thought to myself coldly as I cast my attack spell, it wasn't as though I'd be the one getting hurt.

"Mock *Ice Arrow*."

The spell took all my concentration. It was a new application of the spell (named *Ice*) that had previously been so useless. Of course, I'd been lower level back then too, but what I had lacked most of all was the mind's-eye visualization of the magic. I'd come up with this fresh form of my ice magic based on what the mages I talked to at the pub told me—the mental image was important. When it came time to generate the ice I wanted, I imagined it pointy and sharp, long as an arrow, with an arrowhead of ice at the tip. After a few seconds, an ice arrow was there in my fingertips, just as I'd pictured it. Only, I couldn't fire it out right away like in a video game. If I could, it'd be a true *Ice Arrow* spell.

I grabbed the arrow of ice. "Dia, I'm gonna throw this ice arrow at it, so fall back half a pace!"

"Yep, got it."

Dia fell back a tiny bit from the Skyfish he was squaring off against. Through

my *Dimension*-fueled grasp of the surrounding space, I threw it with precision. My strength and dexterity were enhanced by being at Level 6, so my throwing arm was nothing to sneeze at. I struck the Skyfish with frightening speed and accuracy.

However, it was a Floor 3 monster, not a Floor 1 one. It saw the ice arrow coming and attempted to twist its body out of the way. The arrow grazed its wing, which threw it off-balance. Dia didn't let that opening go to waste, and his blade sliced it in two. Apparently, he'd grown strong enough to fell a monster of its caliber in one blow.

"I... I did it! I took it down!"

Dia goggled at the bisected fish and his sword like he couldn't believe it. Shortly thereafter, the creature turned into light and faded away.

"Congrats."

"Thank you, Sieg. It's like, how should I put it...I'm just filled with emotion, ya know? I've been dreaming about this since I was a kid. Taking down a monster with this sword." He gripped its hilt tight.

I took it he had some kind of emotional attachment to the weapon, which had grown worn from use. I could tell it was a fine blade:

【TREASURED BLADE OF THE ARRACE CLAN】

Attack Power 5. 20% of user's DEX added to Attack Power.

"Right then, let's dive deeper and take down some enemies while we're at it, shall we?"

"Yeah!" replied Dia, the doubt on his face gone.

While I didn't want him getting a taste for doing battle with a blade, the fun he was having was infectious. We repeated that pattern for a handful of fights, and we were never on the back foot against the monsters on that floor. It did take a lot of time, but the creatures we encountered were all killable, even with Dia as the advance guard.

We cleared the third and fourth levels without a hitch and proceeded to the fifth floor. We were around the midpoint of the fifth level when we first saw the dark clouds forming. A monster by the name of Onyx Scorpion proved agile enough to slip past Dia's sword.

"Dia, watch out!"

"Augh, sorry!"

I jumped in front of him and used my sword to block the scorpion's attack. Flustered by how close the monster had come to landing a direct hit, he fell back to the rear. Once he had reached safety, I switched normal *Dimension* to *Dimension: Calculash* and slashed at the monster with all my might. Without Dia's backup, I figured offense was the best defense. I didn't block the enemy's attacks with my sword, opting instead to dodge them outright and then thrusting my sword at its guts. The blade penetrated the Onyx Scorpion's exoskeleton, and the monster faded away, turning into light.

"Phew, that was a close one."

"Th-Thanks, Sieg. You all right?" Timidly, he looked at my face to gauge how I was doing. Maybe it seemed to him as though I'd been in a dangerous spot back there. Thanks to *Dimension*, I'd won comfortably, but it appeared Dia was worried about me.

"It's all right."

"But Sieg—"

"Hey," came a deep male voice, interrupting him, "you were this close to dyin' back there, weren't ya?"

"It's *you*!"

"If it ain't the Level 1 brat! And what a surprise, seein' ya almost bite it on a floor that's outta your league! NOT! Ha ha!"

A man carrying a greatsword appeared, with three others who were likely his allies close by. This was no surprise to me; I'd sensed their approach via *Dimension*. I hadn't paid them much mind, as a fight against people who were only high level enough to be on this floor posed no challenge to us.

Wait, I recognize that guy. Oh, yeah, he's that guy...

The man who'd mocked Dia at the pub back when he was Level 1. I couldn't remember his name.

"Shut up!" said Dia. "I wouldn't have died to that! I just let my guard down, that's all!"

"What's that? You 'let your guard down'? In the Dungeon?! Awful casual, aren't ya? I ain't gonna be surprised if you wind up dead."

It seemed the man and Dia got along like cats and dogs. The two were trading barbs and ignoring me altogether. Incidentally, my menu-sight told me he was a Level 9 swordfighter by the name of Arken. His fellow party members were much the same, without any talents or abilities worth mentioning. Looking at their stats, I concluded I could handle the entire party by myself. Plus, there were no monsters around. I saw no danger in it, so I just stood by and watched as the two quarreled.

"You lookin' for a fight, ya bastard?!"

"Whoa there, brat. If we went at it, that'd just be us pickin' on weaklings. 'Sides, we're not far from the Pathway Proper. A fight between adventurers would get noticed!"

Since I didn't think there were any among them who could grab hold of me when I was using *Calculash*, I mused how we'd be the ones picking on weaklings. More importantly, Arken had said they couldn't fight because we were by the Pathway Proper and would be found out. That confirmed the Pathway bore policing and crime prevention roles.

"I'm *not* weak! I'd never lose a fight to you people!"

"Wait a minute, you're the one who's pickin' a fight here! Look, we don't got the time to be dealin' with a snot-nosed kid like you. We're in the middle of a quest commissioned by our guild," said Arken, shrugging.

He had a point in that Dia was the one picking the fight. Given how ill-suited his abilities were to a fight against other people, he was so stubborn and aggressive. His unwavering conviction was expressing itself in an inadvisable way.

In all honesty, I had zero interest in their pissing contest. What caught my attention were the words “a quest commissioned by a guild.” A guild was a cooperative community of adventurers whose interests aligned. From the information I was aware of, guilds came in a variety of forms, from those founded by the state to gatherings of beginners. For their guild to be entrusting them with quests meant they belonged to a large one.

I didn’t have the time to spare for consorting with other people. I had to surpass human limits in short order, so I couldn’t stay at levels where I had to team up with a guild to be able to dive deeper. That being said, quests did sound like serious fun. As a lover of games, that aspect piqued my interest.

“I’m stronger now! You just gonna run away?!”

“Hmph. Well if you’re gonna be like that, I can’t back down, can I? But we’re with a guild. We can’t butt heads in public. Oh, I know, how about this? Why don’t we compete through the quest?” He smirked. Clearly he’d amused himself.

“Compete through the quest?”

“That’s right. We’ve been tasked with cullin’ a real nuisance of a monster, see. The government periodically hires competent explorers to thin their numbers!”

“Hah! Competent explorers? You guys?”

“Settle down, kiddo,” said Arken. “If you say you ain’t weak, then why don’t we see who can fell the most of those monsters?”

“All right, yeah! You’re on!”

I didn’t slip in a word. To be frank, this whole thing was fresh enough to serve as a nice change of pace, and it seemed like fun.

“So then,” said Arken, his smirk growing wider, “what are the stakes here?”

Those words alone were crossing the line of what I was willing to tolerate.

“I’ll bet anything ya like,” said Dia.

“We can getcha whatever you’d like,” said Arken, “but there’s nothin’ we can take offa *you*. By all rights I’d want some money offa you, but for all I know, you ain’t even got any to take!”

Dia grimaced. “Urgh. I *don’t* have any money.”

“In that case, if you lose, I’ll have ya make us money by sellin’ your body. You’re vulgar and unruly, but you’ve got a pretty mug! If I sell ya where I can sell ya, you’ll get a good price! Ha ha!”

“Feh! Fine! If I lose, you can do what you want with me! But if *you* lose, I get a tearful apology and all the money you’ve got on you!”

“Excellent, then it’s a deal—”

“Hold on, Dia. No betting anything. If you’re putting stuff on the line, it’s a whole different story.”

Before, I’d wanted to respect Dia’s autonomy as much as possible, but naturally, I could no longer just stand by. Betting intangible stuff like pride or dignity was one thing, but I couldn’t accept anything that might lead to real harm.

“What’s your problem? This is between me and the brat!” Arken glared at me, offended.

“Yeah, Sieg! I won’t cause you trouble; it can just be a fight between me and them.” Dia had let the blood rush to his head. It was a bad case of tunnel vision.

If the fight led to a friendly competition, I wouldn’t stop it. If nobody died, then that’d be a peaceful turn. It’d amount to a nice change of pace. This, however, wasn’t the kind of duel I could agree to. Dia was *mine* to use. I wasn’t about to let him become this Arken guy’s chew toy.

“Listen here, Dia. Those guys *prepared* for the quest they’re doing. All *four* of them came fully prepared. Just going off that, there’s a giant gulf between you and them. And above anything else, you can’t beat them in terms of competency. Don’t get me wrong, everybody’s got things they are and aren’t cut out for, but they’ve got *experience* on you. Plus, the guild picked them out as particularly well qualified for the job, so the showdown he proposed must be one of their specialties. And yet here you are, going as far as to wager your own body. You’re being stupid. *Very* stupid.”

“Urgh...” Upon realizing how difficult the duel would be, Dia hemmed and hawed. He did hear me out calmly without flying into a rage, which was nice. He

couldn't ignore my advice, not after all the results I'd yielded for him.

"And the dumbest thing of all is, why didn't you consult with me first? Face it, if you *don't* drag me into this, you've got no shot at all."

"Oh," said Arken, "I get what you're sayin', kid. I never said it had to be a one-on-one duel. We can do this two-on-two. Want any other conditions while we're at it?"

"I'm not saying I want to join in. If you ask me, a duel like this shouldn't be entertained in the first place. We don't have any chance of winning, after all."

"Hey, Sieg, you can't—"

I held up a hand. Then I pulled him in and whispered so that only he could hear, "Are you so intent on dueling them that you'd reveal every card up our sleeves? I won't mince words; these bozos aren't worth the effort. Even if we win, people'll wonder how a pair who were so low level until recently managed to do so. My unique skill needs to stay as hidden as possible. I'd hate for something this idiotic to lead to issues down the line."

"But still, Sieg," he replied under his breath, "I get it, but I wanna knock these guys down a peg with everything I've got anyway. I wanna prove I'm stronger than them! You might think it's childish of me, but to me, making 'em acknowledge me is the most important thing there is!"

Recognition. He couldn't compromise on the chance to gain recognition, even if it cost him his life. I heaved a sigh. We shouldn't engage with them. It'd be best to withdraw now and prove ourselves better eventually through the fruits of our exploits. But to him, that wasn't acceptable. We had known each other long enough now that I understood that about him. Dia wouldn't be satisfied unless he made them acknowledge him right here, right now.

"All right, all right," I said. "Fine then. It might not be the worst idea."

"You really mean it, Sieg?!"

I folded to Dia's sheer ardor. That was what got me. It definitely wasn't the sight of his pretty-girl face, looking up at me with tears in his eyes. Or at least, that's what I liked to think.

I had a small mountain of stress to relieve too. I thought it might be a load off to see Arken and his goons whimper and cry, and I could make Dia even more grateful to me in the process.

“Well?!” shouted Arken, impatient. “Let’s hear it! You gonna run with your tails between your legs or are you gonna *do* this?!”

I exchanged looks with Dia, signaling to him that I’d like him to leave the negotiations to me. He nodded right away.

“Yes, we’ll do it.”

“If you ain’t gonna do—wait, you are? You looked like the brainy type to me, so color me shocked.”

He looked me up and down, taken aback. He certainly had the stuff of a party leader in this death trap of a Dungeon.

“Now then, what say we settle on our terms?” I smiled. It was perhaps a ghastly, ruthless smile. I could tell their breaths caught a little.

“Yeah, let’s. How do we determine who wins and who loses?”

“Let’s keep things simple and go by the number of monsters culled. If you could kindly tell us the characteristics of said monsters, that will suffice.”

“You sure you’re okay with that? We’d be operatin’ with no handicap.”

“Ah, please give us one handicap. Just one. Please let us set the time limit. We’d like it to be one hour.”

“Hold up, kid. It could be neither side takes one down that quick.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re all skilled enough to take down at least *one* in an hour? The question is just how many we’ll be taking down in that time. So how about we make that the duel? It’d save all of us time.”

I proposed what I viewed to be the most advantageous conditions for us, given my experience up until now as well as the flow of the conversation. If we were to search for a specific kind of monster, it seemed reasonable to assume we’d run into several of them within an hour of running around.

I was certain that in their case, they knew about the monsters’ distribution

and habitat, so they'd definitely find at least one. Moreover, I knew they'd only agree to it if they figured we'd be unable to find a single one in that time. There was no way they had all that much time to spend on such a silly row, and I couldn't imagine there'd be no time limit for the quest given to them by their guild or what have you.

"Y-Yeah, you've got a point there. Okay, fine. We'll do it your way. It's true we ain't got forever. So, what're we bettin'? I'm sure you've got it all laid out." Arken was wary of me. The dispassionate way I kept suggesting conditions had him on his toes.

"Wait. Before we get to that, what assurance do we have you people will actually pay up if you lose? The way I see it, if the physically stronger side loses the duel, they have no incentive not to just play dumb and not honor it."

"Oh yeah, you're from some far-off country called Fania, so I guess ya don't know, huh? In big countries, if you declare an oath-sworn battle over a ley line, the country will record it. They won't let ya quibble or gloss over losses, and if ya run away, you'll be treated as a felon. Even here in the Dungeon, as long as we use the ley line in the Pathway Proper, it shouldn't be a problem."

I had my doubts regarding this system of duels and sworn oaths, but I didn't press it. That aside, the fact that he knew I claimed to come from Fania meant he recognized me as a pub employee. In that tavern, my traveling here from Fania to get rich quick only to get hurt was now a famous topic of conversation.

"I see. That sounds convenient. As for what we'll bet...let's see..."

"Well?"

"Why don't we bet all the money we have on hand? What money we lack, we can make up for in the way you stated earlier." I smiled contentedly. We were going all in.

What a joy it was to see their faces stiffen.



"Right then, let's get to it," said Arken. "No takesies-backsies, got it?"

"That's fine by me," I replied.

In the end, we went all in. I wound them up by averring that two versus four would be even in our eyes, and they couldn't back down after that. After everything that had been said, relaxing the terms of the duel would be seen as cowardly. Their pride as longtime adventurers ensured the duel would go on. Besides, from their point of view, this was to be one-sided exploitation, as there was no way they could lose to a pair of children who'd been so low level mere days prior. They had no reason to reject any of the conditions. In this world, everyone knew people only gained levels slowly over the course of years. They'd never dreamed I'd risen to Level 6 already.

We swore our oath on the Pathway Proper, and our opponents shared information on the monsters in question. They were named Hangshades. Black creatures made of liquid, they clung to the walls of the Dungeon like shadows. Characterized by how they ambushed adventurers from their hiding places and hung them by the neck, physical attacks like sword strikes didn't do much to them, and nothing besides magic attacks could deal a finishing blow to them. Due to their unique item drop, we could determine the winning side by the number of item drops collected.

"All right, we're off!" With that, Arken's group split into two bands. I'm sure the four wanted to stick together but split into two groups in order to establish an overwhelming lead. Clearly, they were treating this duel seriously.

"Dia, you get it, right?"

"Yeah, I get it."

We didn't move. Arken's group gave us a backward glance and looked baffled. Not that they came back to ask. I only activated my magic after they left our line of sight.

"All right, let's crush 'em. *Layered Dimension*." I cast the spell and swung my right arm sideways at the same time. I'd gotten so used to *Dimension* that I could scope out information in a wide range in the blink of an eye with minimal MP expenditure. Out of all the information I had gleaned, I let only the shape of the monsters into my brain. By leaving out details I didn't need, I cut down on my MP expenditure, even if only by a little. I soon detected a number of Hangshades lurking in the darkness.

I'd kept my MP expenditure in the single digits, which was passable.

"Target spotted. These monsters may excel at staying hidden, but my power makes me a sore enemy for them. There's no way we can lose this duel."

"Nice going as always, Sieg. I mean, I feel like I can't really contribute, but I guess there's nothing to be done about that."

"That's not true. Your magic'll be the main factor during the battles, so stay sharp."

We broke into a run as we bantered, taking the shortest path to our target within the Dungeon's complex maze. When we drew close enough, I used *Dimension* to pinpoint the target's exact location, and we moved into the sniping phase.

"Target acquired. Right, so put your arm on top of mine, just like when we sniped the bosses."

"Okay, got it. Here I go! *Flame Arrow!*"

The light cleaved the darkness. Hangshade number one died instantly. We immediately went to collect the item it dropped and ran toward the next target. As Hangshades didn't typically move from their spots, this strategy was highly efficient.

"All right, next," I said. "Fire."

"R-Right. *Flame Arrow!*"

And so Hangshade number two met its untimely demise. Not even ten minutes had passed yet. Judging by how much MP I had left, I figured it'd last for an hour and then some. Casting *Layered Dimension* for the second time, I ascertained the positions of yet more targets.

"C'mon, let's keep it up!"

"*Flame Arrow!*"

We hunted Hangshade after Hangshade with no time wasted. Sure, there were times our target avoided the sniper shot and we had to enter combat, but I was practically made to fight monsters that specialized in concealing themselves. As long as I had *Dimension* up, I couldn't be sneak attacked, and

with my *Analyze* option, I couldn't lose track of their whereabouts.

The hunt went swimmingly apart from one slight cause for concern. The Hangshades' death cries kept growing gradually louder. Still, those death cries didn't spur the surrounding monsters to take action, so I was able to continue the hunt without dwelling on it. While I didn't feel we could really lose, we were in the middle of a serious duel. As such, I concluded it'd be best not to waste time contemplating it. That being said, those death cries lingered in my ears; they boded ill, though I couldn't guess what the omen was about.

In less than an hour, we had obtained eleven Hangshade drop items.

"That should be enough. Let's go back."

We cut a leisurely path to the rendezvous point, a space not far from the staircase leading from the fifth to the sixth level. The room had only two entrances, and the Pathway Proper passed through it. That's where we waited for Arken's group. Once they arrived, we compared the number of drop items each party had collected, and their faces turned pale.

"That... That can't be right!"

"There's no way!"

"Really, Arken!" said the woman. "This is your fault!"

None of the four seemed to be able to believe the reality before their eyes, and who could blame them? In a single hour's time, they'd ended up losing all the money they had on them.

"Lies!" yelled Arken. "You musta broken the rules! I mean, how's that *possible*?! Even if you're secretly some veteran, that little punk was still only Level 1! But you're tellin' me you got *eleven* of 'em?! *Eleven*?!"

Arken approached us like a man about to grab me by the collar. A reaction I had foreseen.

"No, sir," I replied. "It's true. We took down eleven Hangshades."

"Yeah!" shouted Dia. "Don't make baseless accusations! We're strong—especially Sieg—so it's only natural!"

For some reason, he didn't forget my words of encouragement. He was

always acting so needlessly admirably, even in times like these.

“Th-This is ridiculous! You! The dumbass waiter! You crawled outta the boonies and got wrecked on the first level! How could you possibly beat us?!”

His party agreed with him aloud that our victory was unthinkable. Initially, I’d half expected them to pick us apart by claiming we counted items we just happened to find or we’d been carrying some from before the bet, but they didn’t even think of that. Perhaps the shock of this unanticipated development had bricked their brains.

“Dammit! C’mon, fellas, surround ‘em!”

And so, Arken’s group resorted to brute force. This, too, I had predicted. At the end of the day, a contest like this was nothing but a matter of might makes right. The strong fooling the weak and robbing them. That was its sole purpose. There was no rule of law to be found there. I still remembered my first day in this world. A weakling pleading for help only to be exploited by the strong. These jokers were reigniting that pain.

My animosity stoked by their self-serving behavior, I blasted them coolly. “After all’s said and done...in the end, this is how it goes. You only proposed this challenge because you thought that if we lost and we attacked like you’re attacking right now, you could just stomp us. And you thought that if you guys lost, you could stomp us anyway. Shaking down clueless weaklings for their coin is all this was ever about.”

“So what?!” Arken barked. “In the world we live in, only the strong survive! Duels? Oaths? Like I give a rat’s ass! If we escape this country, it won’t be an issue, will it? Obviously, we’re just gonna kill your asses and get rich some other way in some other country!”

“So these rules were full of holes from the outset,” I said in disgust.

“Ha! Now ya get it! We don’t need the Dungeon to earn our dough! Sorry, kids, but we’re gonna need you two nice and dead!”

Arken drew his blade, and his allies did likewise. I gave up on talking to them, addressing Dia instead. “You see, Dia? See how there was no point?”

“Yeah...it’s just as you said, Sieg.”

Dia had been hanging his head ever since Arken and company started baring their fangs. He must have really believed it'd be a fair and impartial test of skill—that if we won, they'd be forced to acknowledge him. But the idea that one could earn approval on merit was an empty dream. All that remained was violence and struggle. And since Dia appeared to view duels and oaths with a certain reverence, his shock was even more substantial.

“Leave the rest to me, Dia. You fall back.”

“I'll help too!”

“No, that's okay. I can handle them.”

I drew my sword. I had around thirty percent of my MP left. As I had known this would happen, I'd left some in the tank. It'd be more than enough to overpower them.

“*Dimension*,” I muttered. “*Calculash*.”

“Piece o' shit brats!”

Arken came in swinging.

Two of Arken's allies, a semifer swordfighter and a nimble-looking lancer, followed his lead. I could also see a female mage to their backs, who was beginning to cast a spell. Based on that information, I formulated the shortest route to subdue them.

Arken's sword just missed me. *Too slow*. He was virtually a turtle to me, he was so slow. This was a man whose level was higher than mine, and yet his dexterity and agility were leagues below mine. Moreover, *Dimension: Calculash* adjusted my accuracy and evasion to extraordinary heights, so there was no way he could land a hit on me. The gap was so great that it was almost as though we were operating on different axes of time.

I dashed in. First, I lightly pierced Arken's sword hand and injured both his legs. I watched Arken fall, making sure he was down, then parried the lancer's attack. I slashed at his lance hand as I wove my way through, rushing without pause toward the mage. Meanwhile, the howling semifer swordfighter leaped at me, but I stabbed his arm before he could swing his blade down at me. He moaned in pain and I swept his legs, crossing over his head. Lastly, I held the tip

of my sword against the throat of the mage woman who'd been busy casting her spell. It had all transpired in the space of a few seconds.

I spoke with as deep a voice as I could muster. "What I wanted from this duel wasn't your money. My only wish is for you crooks who insulted Dia to never show your faces to us again. Get out of our sight and I won't do anything."

"It... It can't be..."

Arken and his crew rubbed their gashes as they muttered. The battle had ended in no more than a few seconds, and I reckoned they'd never experienced anything like that before. They gaped in blank amazement at the sword pointed at their mage's throat.

"Well? Answer me. If you don't promise we'll never see you again, I'll have to hurt you more." I punctuated my words by bringing the blade even closer.

"A-All right," she said, "we surrender. I'll get out of your sight right now."

I accepted and considered her as having surrendered. The semifer and the lancer followed suit and gave in.

"Son of a bitch," said Arken. "We did this on the Pathway, so we can't stay in this country anymore anyway."

The strength gap was too plain. They were forced to take whatever I gave them. Besides, they saw that I didn't want their money, so they probably calculated that it'd be best to just quietly capitulate.

"Excellent, that's that. We'll just chalk it up to neither side having any luck today." With the point of my sword, I urged them to take a hike right out of the room.

"So, if we leave this country, you won't do anything to us, I got that right?"

"You do. That said, I will report to your guild or whatever, so you should leave the Dungeon Alliance altogether, at the very least. Plus, if you leave in good time, that'll probably save us some trouble."

"Tch! Damn punks! We'll high-tail it right freakin' now!"

And with that, Arken and his party walked away. The semifer supported Arken with his shoulder, and the four exited the room as a group. Even from a

distance, I could tell they were bickering under their breaths. I followed them with my eyes until they were out of sight, leaving nothing to chance. Once they were gone, I heaved quite the sigh.

“Sorry, Sieg,” said Dia, eyes downcast. “It’s my fault it turned into such a pain.”

“It’s okay. I was pissed at them too. I feel refreshed, avenging you after they saw you in a moment of weakness.”

“I didn’t mean for it to play out like this. I just wanted them to acknowledge me, that’s all.”

Seeing the looks on Arken and his goons’ faces had allowed me to blow off some steam, but it appeared that wasn’t the case for Dia. For better or worse, he was pure of heart; perhaps he’d been picturing a scene where both sides praised each other for fighting a good fight. But that had never been in the cards.

“I’m afraid that’s a tall order. Earning acceptance is a very difficult thing to do.”

In fact, I wasn’t even sure I accepted this world as valid. A hard subject, to be sure.

“I see. So what do we do now?”

“Good question. I used a lot of MP, so we should head back for tod—”

“No, no, I can’t have that.”

A voice from above. It wasn’t Arken’s group. This voice was deeper, hoarser, more ghoulish.

Startled by the sudden sound, I leaped backward. The fact that I had *Calculash* trained on Arken’s party and us being on the Pathway had generated a negligent gap in my enemy detection radar.

Dia followed my example and jumped aside.

“Ah, did I frighten you? Sorry, but you going back now would leave me in a bit

of a fix. Encountering children like you is just too rare, you see. How unlike your years.”

The voice came from something clinging to the ceiling. It resembled the Hangshades we’d been hunting moments prior, but it was a different monster entirely. Hangshades didn’t take such a humanoid shape, and they didn’t have voices. This thing, on the other hand, had a body of black, shadowy liquid, and it was clearly capable of intelligent speech.

The wriggling black liquid. The lack of features where a face should be. We were being spoken to by a genuine horror. The soles of its feet were glued to the ceiling, and its not-face was turned toward us.

I used *Analyze* and checked its menu.

【VIGESIMAL GUARDIAN】Thief of Darkness’s Essence

It wasn’t a person. Moreover, it didn’t even bear a rank. All that was written was that it was the Guardian of the twentieth floor.

Its black not-face laughed. “Heh heh heh. I’m the sentinel of the twentieth floor, Tida. It’s a thrill to meet you.”



Chapter 4: The Twentieth Floor Sought You, Ere I Should Vanish Within the Dark

In this world, I was relatively strong. I couldn't tell you why, but this world treated me warmly in that regard. When it came to my talents, my stats, and my magic, I was a force. That was why I was able to get Arken's party to do as I told them. Over the past few days, I'd come to understand that I was strong enough to pull that off. And I'd ended up demonstrating that strength in the open.

Put simply, I'd gotten cocky.

As I'd obtained power comparable to some of this world's most skilled hands in a few days' time, I'd gotten haughty enough to labor under the notion that nothing could pose a real threat to me in this Dungeon. But that was a mistake. The Dungeon contained outliers, and I'd been told that only two days prior.

And the outlier monster that could spell my end, the black liquid humanoid who called itself "Tida," was gabbing gleefully, glooping down to the ground as it spoke. "I sensed humans hunting Hangshades at breakneck speed, so I came to check and see. I thought this might be the work of a party of six, but it seems I was off the mark."

Before its grotesquery, we were speechless. Alarm bells were sounding in my head: *This thing is bad news. It's being way too in-your-face. That's the way the top of the food chain talks.* Then there was the eeriness of the magic energy seeping out of its body. Everything about it screamed danger.

"Yet what do we have here but a *pair* of intriguing children... I wonder, how would you like to undergo my crucible here and now? Though humanity has reached the twenty-third floor, you all avoid the challenge on the twentieth. If you defeat me, you'll be lionized for it," it continued, sniggering.

That invitation was like a deal with the devil. As I stood there racking my brain as to what to do about the fiend before my eyes, Dia spoke up in my stead.

“Y-You’re the boss of the twentieth floor? The one nobody’s beaten?”

“The very same.”

“You do look just like the rumors say. Everybody knows that not even Glenn, humanity’s strongest adventurer, could take on the trials of the tenth and twentieth floors. You’re that thing of legend?”

“That takes me back. I duked it out with good ol’ Glenn a few years back. He was on the right track, too, but he came up a hair short.”

It was a legend, all right. The boss monster that even veteran divers could only flee from. And with that knowledge, there was only one choice for us to make.

“Run, Dia!” I shouted, rushing back toward the surface.

There was no need to take any risks here. If it really was the boss of Floor 20, it only made sense to challenge it *after* getting one’s MP and physical condition in perfect form upon leveling up. This was the fifth floor, and we were Level 6. At the very least, it wasn’t an enemy we ought to be fighting here and now.

“I wasn’t finished talking. You’re not going anywhere. Alty, if you please.”

I stopped in my tracks when I saw her. A girl standing in the direction I’d been heading. This “Alty” girl gave off uncanny vibes no less disquieting than Tida’s. Her form was that of a short girl with red hair, and she had a large quantity of glyph-inscribed bandages wrapped around her body. Strangest of all were her legs, which were made not of flesh and blood but pure fire. Green flames spouted from underneath her bandages, and she was floating in the air.

“Road’s closed,” said this second fiend with a striking air of intimidation.

I didn’t try to force my way through. Instead, I tried to glean some information.

【DECIMAL GUARDIAN】Thief of Fire’s Essence

I had no words. Normally, she’d be the sentinel of the tenth floor.

Good god, this is Floor 5! What are multiple bosses from loads of floors ahead

doing here?!

“Sieg, we’ve gotta fight,” came Dia’s voice from behind. “I believe in us; working together, we can beat anybody!” In the face of the bosses’ pincer attack, Dia braced himself and drew his sword.

Wait, you can’t be serious! Hold on a second!

Even if Dia engaged them, I didn’t want to. This was all wrong. If these things were really the bosses of Floors 10 and 20, it was odd for them to be on Floor 5. This was anomalous.

“Wait, Dia!” I had to stop him, deciding there was no choice but to speak with the monster named Tida. Since we could talk to the creature, I reckoned there must be a path away from battle. “Erm...Tida, if I may... Oh, uh, should I call you *sir?*”

Tida shook its head, amused.

“Please don’t call me ‘sir.’ You’re human and I’m a monster. We can’t go setting a bad example.”

“Sorry about that, Tida. We aren’t looking for a ‘crucible.’ In fact, we’d rather like to exit the Dungeon right away.”

“I see. No desire to battle, eh? However...we’re humans and monsters. And when we cross paths, we fight! That’s the world’s unwritten rule, is it not?”

This bastard!

Tida had framed it as an invitation, but it seemed it had no intention of giving us a say in the matter. The being of inky darkness throbbed with full life, baring its battle lust.

“So you mean to fight no matter what. Then I see there’s no point arguing,” I said as I drew closer to Dia. I needed to operate alongside him, whether that was to run or to fight.

“The Dungeon’s trials exist for the worthy. And you two are worthy. That’s the sense I get.”

Tida had the feel of a predator unable to resist pouncing. He sang our praises and crowed that he’d be the one to crush us.

“Sieg, let’s stand our ground, come what may! This is the Dungeon! Things like this can happen!”

Dia was the same as Tida—he, too, was smiling in the face of this powerful threat, not hiding his will to fight, as if to say he’d be the one to crush *it*. His impulsiveness was manifesting in the worst way.

“Oh! You sweet young thing, you *understand*!” said Tida, rejoicing at Dia’s fighting spirit. “I knew it! You two are superb. You have the talent, but even more importantly, you have those *faces*. You resemble those heroes of yore so very closely!”

“You’re right,” whispered Alty from behind. “There is a resemblance.”

“Now then, let’s throw down, shall we?” said Tida.

I instantly stood back-to-back with Dia and assumed my battle stance against Alty.

“Drat,” said Tida at the sight of that. “Two against two isn’t what I want. For a boss battle, it’s one or bust.” With the glibness of somebody talking about the latest fashion trends, it halved its own war power.

It looked as though the fiend was adhering to some rule or other, and I wondered if I could find a way out through that.

“Which one of us wants to go first, Alty? Strictly by floor order, you’d be first, since you’re in charge of Floors 1 to 10.”

“I’ll pass. I’ve still got things to do in this world. Plus, it won’t take long now for all doubt to be cleared up.”

“I see. Then I’ll be the one. You can just seal the chamber. May I ask you to use those flames of yours?”

“Sure, fine.”

I was filled with trepidation as I watched the two powerhouses blithely discuss their arrangements. I’d have run if the opportunity had presented itself, but that wasn’t to be. However, from what they were saying, it seemed that if we just waited, we could avoid a two-on-two bout.

Fire gushed out from Alty’s body, forming barriers of black flame blocking the

entrance and exit.

“It’s right on top of the ley line, so it won’t hold for long. See ya later, Tida.”

“Ah, thank you.”

And with that, Alty vanished amid the flames. I might have lost my lunch if we’d had to fight while flanked by two bosses, so this was preferable, but her parting gift had sealed off any avenue of escape.

“Excellent; the field is ready. Starting now, this place, yes, this very room *is* the twentieth floor. The floor of Tida, Thief of Darkness’s Essence. Forgive the hasty construction and my being on a work trip, so to speak, but think of this flame-sealed space as the twentieth floor. Now then, you two—it’s time to take on the Vigesimal Trial!”

Its not-face contorted. This was it; Tida meant business now. The magic squirming through its black liquid body pulsed, and the air convulsed. What humanity it had was scraped away, and it transformed. Its “arms” became blades, its “legs” digitigrade animal legs. Its human shape cast aside, it took a form more appropriate for a monster—that of a brutal beast.

I cast my dimensional magic at once. “*Dimension: Calculash!*”

At the same time, Tida’s black liquid undulated, and it bounded forward like a panther. In the blink of an eye, it pressed close to Dia and brandished its blade-arm.

“Dia!” I shoved him away, saving him from the killing edge.

“Ah! I knew it! You can see me coming, can’t you?!”

Sorry I can’t measure up to your lofty expectations, but being able to see you coming doesn’t mean my body can react in time. I shuddered at the realization that I could only draw even with its movements by the skin of my teeth, and that was with *Dimension*, the core of my battle prowess. If that fell flat, I had nothing to work with. Once again, I entertained the option of fleeing, but I discarded the idea instantly. So long as the enemy’s speed outmatched ours, it wasn’t realistic, and that black blaze couldn’t possibly be your ordinary everyday fire.

Hoping against hope, I swung my one-handed sword with all my strength at Tida's inky form.

Clank. My sidelong slash was caught in the fiend's blade appendages. Then it sent those blades down the flat of my sword. I let go of the weapon to evade Tida's strike. For a fleeting moment, my sword stood suspended in the air. I clutched it again and thrust it at Tida's head, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it move that was at once offense and defense. A brilliant feat made possible by *Calculash*.

Yet my foe observed that maneuver and dodged the thrust. "Heh heh heh! Your dexterity and agility are top class! They're easily Level 20 tier! I knew it! You are worthy!"

"Flame Arrow!"

A laser pierced its torso, boring a hole through it. Dia had incanted the spell even though he'd been pushed aside. Tida froze up. Seizing this chance, I closed in and slashed our enemy from the tip of the shoulder diagonally down.

"Yes!" Dia shouted, overjoyed that we'd fully landed every hit in our combo assault.

Not only was there a hole in Tida, the creature had been bisected too. One couldn't be blamed for chalking it up as victory, but I didn't let my guard down, putting some distance between us anyway. My cold sweat was unrelenting, the absurd chills down my spine unrelenting.

"Oh no, I'm afraid that won't cut it. I'm a monster, you see." Tida's not-face fluidly distorted to look like a human visage. The hole in its torso closed up, and its blade-arms further transformed, combining into a large hammer that it swung at me with immense force.

I considered myself a deft hand at evading stabbing or slashing attacks by narrow margins, but this was the first blunt force attack for me. Taken aback by the sudden change in the enemy's weapon of choice, the hammer grazed me.

"Khh! Augh!"

The impact of the blow was unbelievable despite the fact it had only grazed me. I weighed around sixty kilograms, yet I was blown away like I weighed

nothing. I couldn't even soften my landing, and I tumbled onto the Dungeon floor. For the first time in a while, I tasted a dull pain assailing my whole body. It was then I noticed this was the first time I'd taken damage since I started using *Dimension*. Cracks started forming in my absolute faith in it.

"Heh heh, I'm impressed. You, the pretty one, your magic blasted me quite some distance. And you, the nimble one, your slashes pack a punch. I suppose I'd have died twice just now," stated Tida mirthfully, undoing its double-limbed hammer and swinging its liquidy arms.

As I checked to see what damage I'd taken, I considered the enemy's special characteristics. *Yep, gotta think video game boss*. Maybe its true body lay elsewhere. Maybe its weakness was a "core" inside it. Maybe only a certain type of attack worked on it. Or maybe, judging by what it had just said, it needed to be "killed" over and over again. There was a smorgasbord of choices to make.

This is stupid. If it were a video game boss designed for me to beat, I'd make an all-out effort to fight and win. But to be painfully honest, there was no way I could believe this thing had a gamey way to beat it. There had to be times there was no ace up my sleeve that I could use to beat my opponent. If I seriously went at it with Tida, I wouldn't last long.

"Heh heh heh! I take it you're racking your brain over how to beat me. Truly, I would love to tell you, but then it wouldn't be much of a test, would it?"

The bastard excelled at rubbing people the wrong way. *If you wanna tell me, just tell me!*

"Sieg, what do we do?!"

"Stay the course! When you see an opening, blast it with holes!"

I sprang at Tida with all my might. In the end, we still lacked information. There was only one thing I could do in that moment.

"We're going full throttle! *Dimension: Calculash!*"

We would shred that stupid smirk to pieces!

"Even faster now, eh?!" it said admiringly, intercepting my desperate rush.

If I carried on as normal, my sword would never reach it. Besides, given how much MP I had left, I wanted the battle to be brief. My sole hope was to take my chances.

As I closed the distance, I dropped into a lower stance. Then I whipped the sword I held in my right hand out of the sheath on my left. That was it. That was my plan. But I focused all of my strength and speed into that one attack. A full-speed, full-power flash of steel with no regard for either my magic power or my vitality.

Tida saw the strike coming and attempted to knock it aside with its right arm-blade. Using *Calculash* at super high density, I could grasp the situation to the tenth of a second and the movements of objects within this space in units of less than a millimeter. Time ground slower and slower. It felt like a chemical reaction combining the magic power coursing through me and drugs in my brain. Within this solid yet loose stretch of time, I ruminated, contemplated, and deliberated. And I found the optimal maneuver to get the better of my opponent in this split-second clash.

I struck Tida's side with the gauntlet on my free hand. The move wouldn't have worked had it been a single millimeter off, but it met its mark, narrowly shifting the tip of Tida's swinging edge. As a result, my blade strike won out, slicing the monster through the abdomen.

But I couldn't relax just yet; I slashed upward to get Tida in the face. Bisected though it was, the Guardian still tried to swing a blade-arm at me. My hyperaware state of mind allowed me to dodge by a hair's length.

Its attack having missed, Tida lost its balance. I slashed and slashed at its head from every angle.

"Diiiiieeeee!"

I sliced and slashed and hacked and chopped until Tida fell in scraps and tatters on the ground, the black liquid scattered around as gel. It had been unable to maintain its base form.

Tida was down. I'd taken it down. If it *wasn't* down, then what on earth would it take?

Yet, I had a bad feeling. The ice covering my heart wouldn't melt.

The black liquid wriggled and squirmed, making the shape of a mouth. And it spoke: "Kah, Ha, ha hA, I'm no MaTch. You bEat me in BotH speEd and deXtErity. DuRing tiMes like theSe, I usE m-Magic to fight."

I shrieked before that profane spectacle. "Dia, fire!"

"I'll blast you to smithereens!" shouted Dia. "*Flame Arrow!*"

Dia's spell packed noticeably more power. This *Flame Arrow* was different from usual. It wasn't the laser that pierced through the air instantly; instead, its range was wider, the firing duration longer. The overwhelming heat burned the body of the monster that lay scattered on the ground, but Tida wasn't quite burned to smithereens as promised. There were some shreds left, which crept and crawled like worms, gathering together. Then Tida's spell was complete.

"Heh. Heh heh! Spellcast: *Wailing Lamb's Gloom.*"

The second it finished incanting the spell, a black curtain fell over my field of vision.

"What the—?! The hell is this?!"

The abrupt pall of darkness left me dazed and confused. *Dimension* was telling me the light in the room hadn't changed, which is why I was so bewildered. The change was in *me*. My sensory *experience* of darkness was now amplified. It felt as though *something* concerning my perception of light and dark had been stolen from me. A thin blanket of black hung over the information I picked up through *Dimension* as well, but it wasn't black in the physical sense. That wasn't lost on me. This was a mental darkness. An emotional, spiritual darkness.

"I've taken the liberty of stealing your habituation to the dark," stated Tida from the blackness. "By another name, I am the Thief of Darkness's Essence. Only, I'm not called that because I control the element of darkness. I've a talent for manipulating the *minds* and hearts of man. You could consider me a monster specializing in attacks on the mind. I induce adverse effects on all those who touch my darkness without exception."

It carried on with pride about its magic. While it didn't go so far as to mention any weaknesses, I still had to thank Tida for its loose tongue. There was a distinct possibility I could glean a way to victory through our enemy's gloating. "The element of darkness." "Mind attacks." "Adverse effects." Those terms reawakened a video gamey way of thinking in me.

"You touched me too many times," said Tida, chiding my carelessness.

I could feel the black liquid clinging to my body wriggle. I wasted no time brushing away what I could within reach of my hands. It seemed that in that time, Tida's body finished mending itself. I could make out a silhouette in the depths of the now-denser darkness. My vision was now almost totally useless, but I could dimly sense via *Dimension* that the shadowy figure was still a distance away. Thinking about things from a gamer's perspective, I settled on what to do and focused not on the figure of darkness, but on myself.

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Confusion 5.29, Mind Taint 1.00, Darkness 1.00

I'd gained two new status effects.

"Now then," said Tida, "on to Round Two!"

Before I could take a breather, the shadow and its voice pressed nearer. I wanted to read my menus some more, but it seemed I didn't have that kind of time.

"Urgh! I still see shadows!" I had no choice but to slash in the shadow's direction.

"Your swings lack clarity."

I felt a heat in my shoulder. I didn't get the tactile sense that I'd cut the shadowy figure. Instead, *my* left shoulder was slashed.

"Guh!"

"You've fulfilled the trigger condition again. I've entered your being. I suppose I'll take your legs next. Spellcast: *Black Knights' Palsy*."

Tida snapped its fingers and my knees gave out. The feeling in my legs was corrupted, and it felt like they were no longer my own. I was unable to remain on my feet.

“Wha? Huh?!”

I didn’t know what was happening. My legs had crumpled, and I’d collapsed as soon as Tida had declared its spell was cast. I tried mustering the strength to stand again, but found I no longer knew how to do that—how to stand back up. My body itself was fine; my nerves just weren’t receiving my orders.

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Confusion 5.30, Mind Taint 2.00, Darkness 1.00, Partial Paralysis 1.00, Blood Loss 0.31

Now I’m paralyzed too?!

“I will say, magic that’s this strong is tough to pull off unless my sludge is on you. That being said, I suppose with this, it’s already the end for you.”

Tida’s shadow edged slowly closer. I couldn’t muster any strength, and that high-speed barrage attack had left my MP stores scant. I had no means of resisting.

I was scared. Dead scared. A freakish fear took dominion over my whole body, accelerated by the clinging darkness. Tida said it had robbed me of my comfort with the dark. The sensation felt like those times an infant cries in the night for no real reason, frightened by the darkness, growing uneasy dwelling on death. It was that sort of unidentifiable but nevertheless gigantic darkness that filled my heart.

“Aaaggh! S-Stay back! Back, you hear me?!” I wailed like a toddler.

“Hmph. So you got hit by *fear* too, huh? I see you too are the owner of a brittle heart,” it said coldly, the joy in its voice gone. “A heart that darkness can engulf. I had high hopes for your talents, but your spirit is weak.”

Its voice was that of something that wouldn’t balk at slicing the head off the

cattle in front of it.

“Flame Arrow!”

A beam of light blitzed through the darkness, interrupting Tida’s little monologue.

“You okay, Sieg?!” Dia broke into a run, concerned for me and my flagging spirit.

How could I possibly be okay? I couldn’t fight in this state, and Dia couldn’t fight solo; he’d get slaughtered. I had to dispel Tida’s magic somehow. On an intellectual level, I understood that. But my body wouldn’t stop shaking. The shaking wouldn’t stop!

“Ahh, the pretty one. I forgot you were there. You’re a one-trick pony, reliant on others and on magic. Oh, I know—if you only know that spell, I’ll steal some phonemes from you. Three ought to do the trick. I won’t even bother taking your whole voice.”

“What are you yapping about?! You stay away from Sieg! *Fla—!*”

Dia’s dismay was palpable; I could tell even beyond the darkness. If Tida meant what it had said, Dia had been rendered “wordless.”

Against the archetypal status-effect-centric boss, the magic-centric Dia stood little chance. Without me at the front as the advance guard, his success was out of the question. I had to hurry. To do something about this mind magic. I had to be the one to fight. So I needed to soothe my heart.

Wait...my heart?

It was then it dawned on me. If this status effect played off my mind, it was worth attempting.

“Fla—! Fla—! Ugh! I could say the words just fine a second ago! Why’s it impossible now?!”

“A mage who can’t even cast spells without incanting is no match for me.”

It’s dark, I thought to myself.

It’s dark so dark and I’m scared I’m afraid to die I don’t wanna die it’s the end I

don't want it to be over not in this bullshit backwater what'll become of my sister I'm gonna die and she'll be left with nothing and no one this is such a joke nothing makes sense fuck off with this shit STOOOP

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

I just had to deliberately speed up my own spiral of fear and anxiety, thereby causing the skill to trigger.

The curtain of darkness ebbed as my mental state stabilized. I wouldn't say I was totally back to normal, but I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other. If I recovered my will to fight, I still had a path forward.

I pressed my trembling feet firmly onto the ground and rushed Tida down.
“Get away from Dia!”

Tida couldn't dodge my surprise attack, caught off guard by my sudden ability to move again. My sword pierced through its back.

“Ice! Freeze!”

I discharged the freezing ice magic from the tip of the sword, unleashing every ice spell in my arsenal. I pictured ice forming inside of Tida's body and freezing the entirety of the monster, and poured the remainder of my MP into it. Naturally, my MP reached 0 in short order, but the spell didn't cut short. Not that I had ever verified the assumption that I'd be unable to use magic if my MP reached 0.

Then it hit me. In place of MP, it was eating through my life force—my maximum HP.

【STATUS】

HP: 152/197

MP: 0/262

HP: 140/190

MP: 0/262

HP: 128/183

MP: 0/262

My health was steadily draining away.

“Freeze! Freeze, freeze, FREEEEEEZE!”

I staked it all on that one spell, wringing out every ounce of my strength and visualizing Tida freezing over. I *detonated* my magic. I aimed to bring forth cold waves rivaling the whole of Antarctica. I aimed to suppress every vibration down to the molecular level. I aimed to freeze both the dread fiend named Tida and myself in the process.

Ice formed inside the monster. The temperature in the chamber plummeted, and the black liquid gradually turned to solid matter. The residual waves froze my wounds as well. I saw stars, and the taste of metal filled my throat.

I was left defenseless, and Tida’s arm cast off the ice and struck me on the cheek. Then it commended me as it distanced itself from me. “Ghh, urgghh! Not bad!”

I regained my footing and glared at my enemy. Owing perhaps to “???,” my vision and mind were in good condition. My legs had healed over time as well.

Tida was laughing loudly from afar as its body creaked and cracked with the ice. “Heh heh, bwah ha ha ha! Tell me, how can you stay on your feet? How are you able to fight on? Excellent! You’re *excellent*!”

Going by Tida’s stiff bearing, I surmised the ice spell was working its magic, yet it seemed I’d be hard-pressed to call it a game-winning play. However clumsily it moved, the nightmare was still heading my way.

Sensing I’d caught it off guard, I decided to throw in some smack talk. “It

seems like the magic you call your specialty doesn't work on me."

I pretended I was unfazed, while in reality, I was so exhausted that I thought the blood vessels in my brain might just pop. Yet I put on my best bold front all the same.

"Doesn't it?" said Tida. "You succumbed to panic mere moments ago. It'll take time for you to shed it completely, won't it?"

"Maybe. Let's find out, shall we?"

Tida was so jazzed about having me as an opponent that I wouldn't have been surprised if it had burst into song. It approached, that awful "smile" still glued to its not-face.

I finished checking my status while we spoke.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 101/171

MP: 0/262

CLASS:

LEVEL 6

STR 4.12

VIT 4.21

DEX 5.11

AGI 7.24

INT 7.23

MAG 11.43

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 6.61, Mind Taint 0.34, Blood Loss 0.31

My MP was nil, and my HP was down by almost half despite having never even taken a direct hit. That rash, devil-may-care explosion of cold had dealt considerable damage to me. Yet I screamed my magic out all the same.

“Dimension!”

I was running on fumes, tapping into my maximum HP, and used what small amount of magic I could draw out to aid in the fight. Tida’s death blade came for me, but I narrowly managed to block it with the flat of my sword. *Dimension* wasn’t as potent as before, but Tida was also hampered by the ice spell.

“If you touch me, you can’t avoid my mental magic! Next, I’ll take your hand!”

It liquefied its free hand and launched its sludge at me. As I was too occupied with fending off its blade-hand, some of the liquid stuck to my skin. Then, the feeling in my sword hand went out of whack, and my sword fell from my...

If my sword falls, I’m dead. I’ll die without a damn thing I can do to stop it. At least spare me that fate. I don’t wanna die. I can’t stand it!

This sucks I hate this I don’t wanna die this is the worst I can’t die here stop please no I don’t wanna die I DON’T WANNA DIE

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

I picked the sword back up, gripping it tight. “AHHHHHHH!” I swung it frantically, trying to slice through Tida’s frozen neck.

My foe grunted, solidifying its hand in order to block my sword, but it was too slow. It couldn’t erase the openings it had left when it cast its spell and flung its liquid at me. I lopped its arm off before it could harden. The tip of Tida’s elbow, which had begun to freeze, was instantly amputated. The black sludge arm flew through the air.

In response, Tida retreated, leaping a great distance back and catching its own

dismembered limb.

“Look at you go! So my magic really *isn't* working on you! Ha ha ha! See, this is why I can't get enough of you!”

Tida tried to reliquefy the arm and reincorporate it into its body, but the frozen segment wouldn't turn to liquid, meaning only half of it could meld back in. It discarded the frozen bit, which slammed onto the floor and shattered into shards.

“Looks like parts of you don't come back to you if they're frozen.”

“Heh heh heh. You'll just have to verify that for yourself through battle.”

“Don't mind if I do!” Sensing from Tida's behavior that if I attacked now, I'd have a chance of victory, I threw myself at the menace.

“I have, however, gotten used to people resisting magic, same as you. Much of the time, those kinds of mages can only resist specific things.”

Tida held its blade-arm at the ready and hurled its opposite arm's inky liquid my way. I reckoned that since I was armed with my “???” skill, that wouldn't be an issue, so I took the hit as I closed the distance.

“Your power isn't all that's exasperating. Even more so are your composure, feinting, discernment, and observation skills.” Tida distanced itself, smiling.

Then, a status effect hit my body. My dizziness disappeared, and my head started getting clearer. I was about to trigger “???” but desisted. This wasn't a state of mind that'd get me killed, and if I did induce it, it'd at the very least open me to attack. As such, I concluded it wasn't worth going overboard and triggering the skill.

My urge to act was coming to a boil. “I'm gonna make some more mincemeat outta you!”

I unleashed a series of sword strikes against Tida, slashing at the monster again and again, but the one-armed fiend blocked every strike.

“Your moves are stale!” Tida found an opening and sent me flying with a kick. My attack has gotten so close, yet I had failed. The blood rose to my head and, blinded by emotion, I charged at Tida, swinging wildly.

“S-Sieg, calm down!” shouted Dia, who’d stepped back.

His remarks annoyed me. I just knew that I’d chop the stupid boss to pieces in no time flat, and I didn’t want him interrupting me.

“I *am* calm!”

“It’s obvious it’s reading you like a book!” Dia replied. “It clearly got in your head!”

Got in my head? I narrowly managed to suppress my irritation and checked my menu.

【STATUS】

HP: 92/169

MP: 0/262

CONDITION: Confusion 7.61, Mind Taint 2.35, Blood Loss 0.32, Uplift 2.01

I saw “Mind Taint” and “Uplift” there. I clicked my tongue, then filled my heart with the fear of death once again in order to trigger “???”.

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

But that didn’t stop my emotional uplift either. The exhilaration in my head wouldn’t abate. Pure belligerence kept on boiling my brain like an open flame.

【STATUS】

HP: 92/169

MP: 0/262

Condition: Confusion 8.61, Mind Taint 0.08, Blood Loss 0.32, Uplift 2.01

“Uplift 2.01” wasn’t going away. “???” did nothing to negate it. Then again, maybe it wasn’t recognized as a bad status effect. Besides, the whole idea that it *would* cancel bad status effects was just conjecture and wishful thinking. There were too many uncertain elements to fight using such an under-studied skill as a linchpin.

“I knew it—you’re not able to drown it out! I won’t give you the time you need to calm down!”

Tida swooped down on its perplexed prey. Its sludge swirled in one hand as the blade that was its opposite hand rushed in for the attack. If I evaded the sludge coming at me, I’d be hard-pressed to actually fight, so I ignored it and focused solely on Tida’s blade.

“Are you sure you don’t need to dodge? Spellcast: *Rebel’s Grumbling!*”

A spell permeated my body. It magnified my excitement, nullifying any and all self-control. My blood boiling, I gave in to the urge to continually cross blades with my formidable opponent. I gritted my teeth.

“I see the fire in your eyes! I love a human with that fire in them!”

My body charged forward of its own volition. My physical condition was *too* good; I couldn’t put on the brakes. My seething brain was screaming, clamoring for me to defeat the enemy. Yes, my sword’s speed and force had risen, but I was now incapable of so much as thinking about tactics or technique. Our blades collided over and over, sparks flying. And all the while, Tida’s ink kept eating away at me.

“Tell me, isn’t this just marvelous?!” Tida cried in singsong tones. “The clashing of sword against sword! Dueling to utter exhaustion! This is what it means to *live!*”

I couldn’t deny it. In that moment, I couldn’t get enough. Battling was just so much *fun*. Even supposing I was playing into Tida’s hands, there was no stopping myself. I was now too attached to this head-on clash, no matter how

torturous it was. My HP was running low by then as well, but the idea of retreating never crossed my mind.

“Heh heh heh! Bwah ha ha ha!”

Tida’s laughter, the black liquid, both flushed all sense from my empty little head. The dampening of my mind wasn’t an unpleasant sensation. In fact, it was invigorating. The chaff in my heart was peeling away—plans, schemes, consequences, and all the rest of that vulgar drivel was gone. I didn’t need to be fettered by polite fictions or by what would be boons or banes to me.

I heard my companion’s voice from behind. “Stop, Sieg! If you keep—”

“Get off my back, Diaaaaa!” I blurted out reflexively. In that moment, anybody who’d get in the way of this blissful moment was my enemy.

“Sieg!” His voice was growing closer.

I didn’t let up, swinging my sword in an unceasing flurry. I didn’t look back.

My life continued ticking down. The more this dragged on, the less sharp and the less hard-hitting my sword became, worsening my prospects and losing me ground. I knew that at this rate I’d be defeated, but I couldn’t make the connection that I should change my strategy.

Tida’s blade continued to fend mine off, and slowly but surely, it approached my flesh. The situation was becoming increasingly dire. Then, at last, it swung the blade for my neck—the winning move.

It seemed my end was at hand. This was my limit after doing nothing but whale on it recklessly. I was left without an ounce of strength—the price of my foolhardy onrush. I was wide open, and Tida capitalized on that, thrusting its blade toward my throat—

Before it could reach me, Dia jumped between us.

He did it to protect me.

Blood sprayed through the darkness. The stroke of Tida’s blade slashed Dia diagonally from the shoulder, but Dia swung his blade at Tida regardless, to no

avail. Tida's second strike lopped off Dia's sword arm.

Drenched in blood, Dia collapsed.

"Ah... Augh..."

I watched his severed arm fly through the air.

The sense of euphoria that had controlled me was snuffed out in an instant, replaced by a savage chill like an icicle down my spine.

"Aughhhhhhh!"

I saw the person in whom my heart had set root break in slow motion. Memories of the time I first met Dia flashed before my eyes.

When all was said and done, he was a stranger to me. A tool to be exploited for my benefit. If push came to shove, using him as a human shield was the clever play. It was only natural to use and discard him. That Dia took that blow for me was luckier than not for m—

No.

The person I didn't want to lose, the person I treasured, was going to pieces. That was no stroke of luck. I wouldn't let Tida get away with cutting him down. And more so, I couldn't forgive myself for making him take the hit for me. My rage had two objects—Tida and Siegfried. An emotion not unlike lightning. My voice trembled. "DIAAAAA!"

It lasted a split second. For one fleeting moment, my eyes locked with his. And in that instant, I didn't know whether it was his eyes that were pleading for help or my own. But somehow, I was sure of one thing—the one who'd unconsciously been seeking salvation this whole time was *me*.

Anybody would have sufficed. I just didn't want to tackle the Dungeon alone. No matter how brave a front I put on, I hated the idea of being all alone in a world like this. It was just that Diablo Sith happened to be the one who'd caught my eye. I had thought I might die at any moment, so I'd extended a hand, thinking I could win him over to my side and have some peace of mind. And

then, for good or for ill, we became comrades. If I wasn't mistaken, we could have even become friends.

But if my partner died here, I'd be alone in the dungeon again.

By "dungeon," I didn't mean this dark, dingy hunk of rock. I meant the dungeon that was this endlessly vast fantasy world. Once I got a taste of companionship, the terror of solitude only swelled many times over. I was filled with feelings both pure (wanting to save Dia because he's my friend) and self-serving (wanting to do so to save my own skin), and this glut of emotion no longer had anywhere to go. So I moved.

"GET OFF HIM!"

I deflected Tida's blade as its third strike was aiming to cut Dia's head off, and I forced the monster to retreat by slamming it with my body. I rushed over to the fallen Dia, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw his eyes. They were hollow and devoid of life. He was looking at his own right arm, which was tragically on the floor, still clutching his sword. He kept gazing at it in a stupor.

There was so much blood pouring out of him; death was obviously approaching.

Tida wobbled back to its battle stance. "That caught me by surprise. It's so beautiful how humans help one another...and the fact that it's futile makes it all the more so."

It looked as though to this destruction-monger, Dia's deed was admirable. If I didn't know better, I thought it might even break into applause as it drew closer. But its palpable bloodlust made it clear that it wasn't about to pull its punches.

I held my sword at the ready and racked my brain, thinking only of how to kill the damn thing. In order to save the gravely injured Dia, I had no choice but to try slaying it as quickly as possible. Thankfully, the battle euphoria that had robbed me of rational thought had given way to fear. Not the fear of dying myself, but of my friend dying. I might go wild with rage, but there was absolutely no way my body would freeze.

Looking to smash Tida's frozen body, I lunged. My chances of success weren't

promising, but there was one element I could use to outwit it.

“Turned your fear into sheer rage, have you? In that case, I’ll cast my magic once aga— Huh?!”

It’d taken Tida one look at my face to instantly grasp the situation. But as it was about to hone in on me, its eyes reeled wide open in apparent shock.

Tida’s gaze was trained on something behind me.

“Blestspell of Sion.”

A voice that was neither mine nor Tida’s reverberated through the chamber. The fiend instantly leaped back and assumed a defensive posture. Seeing the distance that had opened up between the enemy and me, I looked behind me.

Bubbles of light. There were bubbles of light. It was like something out of a dream. They were several meters in diameter, and they were crowding the air.

“What?!” My eyes opened wide, just like Tida’s.

At the center of the light, Dia stood up, still covered in blood. His hollow eyes were glaring Tida’s way. Unfazed by the endless gushing of his own blood, he swung his severed arm, drawing blood patterns on the ground. This caused the countless light bubbles to run amok. The raging torrent swallowed Tida and me alike. The magic energy’s sheer pressure bore down on me.

The light bubbles didn’t have any physical mass, but they did effectively inhibit magical power. The *Dimension* field I had set up around me began to distort, but Dia cast spell after spell regardless.

Light magic that interfered with all magic powers—Holy Magic. This skill was Dia’s greatest specialty. His proper magic gift.

“Blestspell: *Full Cure*. Blestspell: *Strass Field*. *Divine Arrow*. *Divine Arrow*. *Divine...*”

The magic didn’t discriminate. The healing spell stopped Dia’s bleeding and mended my cuts, but it also infused Tida with light. The offensive spell, meanwhile, didn’t zero in on any targets, instead shooting all over the Dungeon.

Anyone with eyes could tell that Dia was frenzied. I could sense his hostility toward Tida, but no consideration was being made for his ally in the crossfire. At that realization, I distanced myself from him in a cold sweat.

At the same time, I knew this afforded me a prime opportunity. Whatever was happening, Dia wasn't bleeding anymore. I didn't know whether there'd been some factor previously restricting his use of holy magic, or whether he'd ever used it to begin with. What was certain was that with this, Tida wasn't sitting pretty anymore. The light bubbles' magic solidified Tida's fluid body, and I could see how frantically it was dodging all of the spells.

I took my eyes off Dia and rushed straight at our foe. If I got hit by some spell in the process, so be it. With everything on the line, I set up my final attack.

My vision was tinged red, and I tasted metal in my mouth. My legs were heavy as lead, and I had no feeling in either arm. There could be no doubt I had far surpassed my body's actual limits. Yet I ran, putting all of the healing Dia granted me into my limbs.

Tida saw how quickly I was approaching and immediately understood that my attack was a desperate gamble. It shifted to a counterattack stance. I jumped at it, ready and willing to be stabbed or slashed wherever Tida's blade saw fit—unless it was the hand gripping my sword.

Tida read me and swung its arm-blade for my hand. I couldn't dodge it given how far forward I was leaning and how fast I was going. It sliced the back of my hand, and I dropped my sword. Without it, I couldn't deal a lethal blow. Tida knew that and warped its "face" into a victorious smile.

All according to plan.

I grabbed Tida's blade with the hand it had cut. A look of surprise came over its "face," and it tried to move the blade I'd grasped, but it was too late. I used my free left hand to extract my spare blade from my inventory and sliced through Tida's neck in one clean motion.

The horror's head went flying.

I could feel it—I hadn't sliced through liquid, but through solid flesh. Thanks to my ice magic and Dia's holy magic, Tida had completely solidified. Its

headless body went limp, but I couldn't let my guard down yet. I cut its arms and legs and pierced its heart, sealing the deal as much as I could. Then I shifted my focus to its head on the floor, which was staring at me. Its expression was one of surprise, but also of delight.

"AhH, *ahh*, v-vicTory is y-yours," said the disembodied head.

Following that declaration, the berserk storm of magic subsided. I looked behind me to find Dia on his knees, suffering. If I had to guess, his mania had faded after seeing that his sworn enemy had been cut down to size. He was holding his head, perhaps because of the recoil from the long string of spells straining him beyond his limits.

I was panting something fierce. "Yep, you said it. Looks like this fight is ours." I stood ready to deliver the coup de grace.

"Thank you. That was fun. That last spell brought back memories." Tida smiled with delight at the fact it had lost.

Its end was abrupt. A surprise attack hinging on the inventory system. It seemed Tida could have never predicted I'd pull a sword out of thin air.



“With this, my wish is fulfilled. I knew it. You two were the ones to grant my desire. If you could keep this up and grant Alty’s—ah, I mean the fire girl from before. If you could grant her wiSh, fOr Me...”

Little by little, all that was left of it—its head—also turned to liquid. As it gradually became unable to form a mouth, its voice turned huskier and throatier.

“You’re seriously going to drag me into a death match and then ask me to do you a favor?” I replied. “That’s a bit much.”

“Ha, hA Ha, you’re NoT wroNg.”

Tida laughed. Contentedly, at that. It lifted its head, as though to look at some far-off horizon, and muttered to itself.

“aHh, tHat WaS, so, fuN...”

With those final words, Tida melted, and the pool of water turned to light before what had once been our enemy faded away. I relaxed my sword stance and watched it disappear.

Title unlocked: Scouring the Dark

+0.50 to Mental Magic

The textbox declared our victory. In Tida’s wake, a single black gem was left. I picked it up to get a good look.

【GUARDIAN’S MAGIC GEM】

A crystal of the Guardian Tida’s magic energy.

After verifying that the enemy had been annihilated and the item was safe, I ran over to the hyperventilating Dia. He was crouched low, just like the day I’d met him.

My menu-sight told me that at least as far as HP was concerned, I had room

to breathe. I doubted I might die at any minute. However, there were a number of pools of Dia's blood inside the room. In fact, there was so much blood that it was a wonder he was still breathing. It was a safe bet I needed to take him to a hospital immediately.

I placed my sword and other items into my inventory and picked Dia up. He was strangely light. I knew he was small, but this went beyond that. It almost felt like the blood he had lost had pulled everything else out from inside Dia.

"S-Sieg... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry," he muttered, apologizing over and over with varying levels of coherence. His breathing was labored, and his eyes were shut, but he still sensed that I was there with him.

"Let's get back home first. We don't know what might happen."

I saw the black flames that had kept the room sealed had disappeared at some point. I was reminded of the boss that employed those flames, but then I realized fretfully that this was no time to be standing there musing.

"Seems like we can zip right out of here, Dia. You can rest easy, so sleep."

Hearing that, Dia's whole body relaxed, suddenly going limp. I got a fright, but I was relieved when I saw he was still breathing. I began going back down the Pathway, never letting my guard down until we reached the outside. I wasn't doing too hot either, but if I lost consciousness here, all of our suffering would be for naught.

Steadfast and determined, I walked the path made apparent by the gemstone lines, Dia muttering in delirium all the while. He murmured not just my name, but also the names of people and places I'd never heard of. Those words stuck to me like glue—that was how laden with emotion they were. Dia murmured them in apology, in envy, in bitterness.

"I... I'm Dia... I'm...not Sith..."

I held Dia's trembling body tight in my arms, communicating to him through touch that the friend and ally who acknowledged him for who he was was right there with him.

"Sieg... With Sieg around, I already..."

Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought Dia's expression softened, if only a little.

I refuse to let you die, I swore as I headed for the surface. If it was to ensure Dia's safety as soon as possible, I'd trudge doggedly onward. And thus did Dia and I escape the Dungeon.

We returned to the surface, having overcome the Vigesimal Trial that everyone in the Dungeon Alliance steered clear of.

Chapter 5: I Am Diablo Sith

Let's talk about my past.

The past of the adventurer who currently goes by "Dia."

The life of a girl called Diablo Sith.

I don't have a name. When I was brought into this world, my mother feared me as a demon, and so I was never given a proper name.

I was born with tremendous magical power. My body also differed from normal people. I had small wings. It appeared I wasn't purely human. And who could blame the normal human parents of such a child for being afraid of it? They gave me up to be brought up by the village's church.

Fortunately, I was treated warmly from that point on. The priest called me the "Apostlekin" and revered me. According to the primary religion of the mainland, the Church of Levahn, the Apostle was considered a divine representative and proxy. The village's priest constantly expounded the magnificence of my existence and raised me with kindness and respect.

By the time I turned five, I was known all throughout the village as a miracle-worker. Then, in association with the legends of the village, I came to be referred to as "Sith." The legendary Apostle, Sith, was said to have alighted from the heavens as God's envoy, working miracles for the people suffering from poverty. Those tales culminated with Sith marrying the Hero of Legend, and the people of the village being their descendants. Latching onto the "miracles" part of the stories, the villagers kept calling me "Sith."

It was around those days that my parents stopped looking at me with fear in their eyes. Yet they wouldn't treat me, the girl the village worshiped like a deity, as their own flesh and blood either.

I carried out the duties expected of the "Apostlekin." The priest taught me how to cast holy magic, and I used that power to heal the villagers when they

got wounded. In order to keep monsters that would attack the village away, I shaved away at my life force to erect barriers. For the sake of children who were ill, I spent sleepless nights mastering my magic. My power truly was miraculous.

Perhaps I childishly believed that if I put in blood, sweat, and tears, I'd get my parents to acknowledge me as their child one day. In any case, I didn't, in those days, harbor any doubts as to living as this village's "Apostle." All that effort and study did for me, though, was further cement my deification. The villagers began bowing their heads to me. To be afraid to look me in the eyes. That was how uncannily potent my power had grown. It didn't take long for my own parents to start bowing their heads to me. And before long, news of the reborn Apostle Sith made the rounds across each nation.

By the time I was ten, I'd finally started having a true sense of self. I realized that perfecting my magic for the praise and pleasure of others had isolated me. I understood that my magic power had taken from me my parents, my way of life, and the people around me.

That was when it happened. When the consolidation of power known as "the state" moved to take possession of me. To the government, my birth village was too small. Using a bad harvest season as their excuse, I was given as tribute to them.

Looking back, that was the start of it. The moment I fully realized that when people with power want something, they get it.

From then on, I moved from place to place. Sometimes I was expected to work miracles at a serf lord's manor house. Other times I was put on display to generate profits for merchants. Yet other times, I simply satisfied the curiosity of aristocrats. In the end, I was made to dedicate prayers to a certain monarch in person. In effect, miracles meant for the poor and needy were being monopolized by the powerful to benefit themselves.

It was threatening to make me lose sight of my Apostolic duties. I no longer knew what I was living for, or what I wanted out of life. I found myself needing to reconnect with my origins, so I successfully requested the state allow me to look out over my home village.

There it was, my old hamlet, sprawled out before my eyes. It may have been plain, it may have been simple, but it radiated warmth. I observed the villagers once more—poor but living their lives with the strength they possessed.

I went to see the house I was born in. There, I saw my parents living their lives with smiles I'd never seen on their faces before. They were walking with a child, hand in hand. My younger brother. At some point unbeknownst to me, I'd gained a younger brother. This stranger of a brother wasn't so much younger than me, and yet I'd had no idea.

My brother was out messing about like the little kid he was. He particularly loved any play that made use of swords, repeatedly proclaiming he'd be a swordfighter.

"How dependable!" smiled my mother.

"I can teach ya the blade!" smiled my father.

They were smiling. Laughing.

"I'm relieved we've got a son like you."

"I always wanted to be the one to teach my kid the blade if they turned out to be a boy!"

"You're a fine young man."

"You're a tough customer, lad. One day, you'll be a swordfighter not even your old man can beat."

"You're our pride and joy, son!"

"Our pride and joy..."

"Our child..."

Something in my heart stirred.

"What about me?" I murmured. "What about me? I worked so hard. I love fairy tales too. I wanted to be a cool swordfighter too, you know. But everyone told me to study magic. They said the Apostle can work miracles through holy

magic. I killed myself learning magic, you know. You told me too, Mom, Dad. That's why I... Why I..."

The village had many books, particularly books recounting heroic epics and fairy tales so as to pass down plenty of legends. The same went for my house and for my church. Reading was my sole form of entertainment amid all my Apostolic obligations. Or rather, it was the only form of entertainment the village even had. My brother had read the same stories and gained the same admiration for swordfighters that I did.

"The same... I'm the same..."

Before I knew it, I'd showed myself before my parents. To the government, I'd assured them I'd only observe from afar, but my body moved on its own.

"L-Lady Sith?!"

"What are you doing in a place like this?!"

The second my parents saw me, they hung their heads. That was the moment the stirring in my heart turned to sorrow.

"Hey, who's that pretty lady?"

My own brother didn't know me. Presumably, my mother and father were hell-bent on keeping him from knowing. They likely raised him with affection, insisting he was their one and only child.

"I... Well, I'm your—"

"This is Lady Sith," said my mother, interrupting me so I couldn't speak the words. "She's the Apostle sent down from the heavens."

The storm of emotion was so riotous that I wanted to die. To return all creation to ashes and embers. It was the end of my life as the *old* me, and the birth of the *new* me.

After that, I distanced myself from the state, as I'd learned that there had never been a reason I should serve them from the outset. I didn't think about what might happen to that small village due to my disaffection, and I didn't want to.

Now I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be like my kid brother. To be born a

boy, to grow up reading chronicles of heroes and aspiring to the blade, chasing my dreams while showered in love by my mother and father. I wanted to become a skillful warrior of the blade and return to my parents' arms as a gallant sword-wielding hero.

That was my one wish. And I knew what I needed in order to realize that dream. In the end, only people with power could seize anything and everything. They could rake in money, authority, and whatever else they fancied. I understood that at a young age.

At the same time, I knew that it'd only be a matter of time before the state got hold of me once again. They knew how useful I was to them. I'd been submissive up to that point, so I was able to go into hiding without much trouble. But any entity with the wealth and influence of the government could and would find and capture me in the near future.

So I needed to acquire money and power before that happened. The money and power it would take to resist them. I embarked on my journey, my eyes on the stage of the story that shone brightest among all the legends I'd read about—the giant Dungeon that appeared over on the mainland. The heroes who tackled it. Meeting new comrades and bidding them tearful farewells. Looming hardships. The gold and silver waiting beyond those hardships. The glory one can win...

All the information I had on it was skewed, and I chose the Dungeon as my dream to pursue. I set out not as the Apostle Sith, but as a normal little boy—and boys wanted to be swordfighters. I wanted to forget about the holy magic that had robbed me of what mattered most to me.

I held on to the fleeting dream that if I did that, I might be able to start everything over. I walked toward the Dungeon on the mainland, making a beeline for it.

I escaped from brigands. I got fooled by path guides. I got tricked by traders who extended a helping hand only to nearly end up as goods for sale. I almost got eaten by monsters. I ran out of money and food to eat. And the nation I reached at the end of my long journey was Vart.

I thought I might lose heart from the intensity of it all, but I quickly changed

my mind. After all, my heart had been in pieces from the jump. I realized how necrotic, rotten, and malfunctioning it was. If I'd actually wanted money and power, it would have made more sense to use my holy magic. Fixating on the Dungeon wasn't helping me with my "dream." My soul had lost all sense of balance. In my folly, I wanted both to coexist.

Ultimately, I realized that I was just a child. A child that wanted this, that, and everything in between. Greedy, self-centered, self-indulgent, and above all else, pitiful.

Amid this downward spiral, my body became immobile. I sat down, unable to stand up again. Nothing made sense. I shrank low, and apprehension loosened my tear glands. But I couldn't afford to cry.

I couldn't afford to cry, but...

Then I met *him*.

The boy with the black hair and black eyes. The boy with the burn mark down his neck.

"Hey, you awake?"

I lifted my head. Someone was there. I couldn't afford to cry, because I was *not* a girl. That dumb affectation kept my spirits higher, if only a little.

That took place one cold winter, on a night magic fell as snow.



The flashback wound down.

I'd challenged a Guardian, not knowing my place, and my dominant arm was lopped off from the elbow down. Moreover, the now blood-soaked blade that was Tida's arm was aiming to decapitate me.

For a moment, for one split second, my eyes locked with Sieg's. He was on the verge of tears.

"DIAAAAA!"

He was wounded all over, but still he intercepted Tida's blade in order to protect me. The flash of steel was sharp, like those of the heroes I saw in my dreams. The clashing of their blades was too fast for my eyes to track.

This wasn't the time or place, but I thought it beautiful. And I was jealous.

After toppling down, I came to my senses and tried crawling away so as not to get in Sieg's way, but I realized my mistake—I was missing one of the arms I needed to lift my body up. Off in the distance, I saw my arm on the floor, still gripping the sword. I centered my vision on it, and murmured inwardly as I laughed at myself:

Ahh...so this is the end for me...

What a farce my life was. First I was called "Diablo," then I was called "the Apostle." That was why I had tried living as a *new* me. But that new me's life was a wretched one. My old self wound up like *that*, and my new self like *this*.

Still on the floor, I stared blankly at the pool my bleeding wound was making. Acute pain like a burning inferno blazed in my right arm; I was gushing crimson like a fountain. With this amount of blood loss, my vital signs were beginning to fail. I could tell that two of the skills I had, Divine Protection and Life Support, were kicking in, but even that wasn't enough with a wound this grievous. It wouldn't be long before I died. If I received no emergency treatment, it was only natural.

That's fine. That's totally fine. I don't mind. But I refuse to let Sieg die.

I was the one who'd dragged a mere pub employee into this. And I had to prevent him from dying because of me, no matter what it took. I did everything in my power to save him, my own life be damned. But my life was too cheap a price to pay; could it really be enough?

I had a decision to make. My dream was more important than my life. This whole time, I'd set my mind on that ideal. But what about Sieg? He was my first companion. The first person to accept the boy named Dia as valid. We'd only known each other for a few days, but he'd given me so much. He took the time to understand me, and he'd become my best friend.

So in other words...

My dream was more important than my life, but Sieg had become more important than my dream. As such, I cast the holy magic I'd sworn on my life that I would never use again. I wove the spell. The light I'd grown to loathe spawned from within my body.

The old me was supposed to be dead. Yet here she was again with her magic. It was nostalgic. I chewed on the nostalgia of it, the sensation of my soul getting whisked away. A feeling that I'd tasted tens of thousands of times.

"Blestspell."

All that was left was to take down this "Tida" monster. It had said it specialized in mental magic, but its true strength lay in its amorphous body. And just like Sieg's ice magic, I had to make the thing more solid and vulnerable. I had plenty of spells for that. If I used the plethora of holy magics I had drilled into my head since infancy, I could turn the scales so easily.

A spell of compressed light blanketed the room. I was dizzy, and my vision was fading. But I had to hold on to consciousness. If my brain was too blood-deprived for me to select my spells in a levelheaded way, then I'd just have to choose through intuition.

I was about to black out. To be swallowed inside darkness was the reality. Nevertheless, I could see the enemy.

Take it down, even if it kills you. Think of nothing else. Protect Sieg. Protect Sieg. Protect Sieg.

I sensed magic forming that pushed my body past its limits. My dream was done for, but what had replaced it was giving me the strength to reach beyond, which was why the old me wanted to protect him at all costs.

The following skill has activated: Overprotection

Intensifies a portion of your emotion in exchange for some of your emotion.

Now, everything that I am exists for Sieg's sake.



Chapter 6: Aim for the Deepest Level

The first place I headed for after breaking out of the Dungeon was a hospital. I searched for a fully equipped, high-quality medical institute and found my way to the biggest hospital in all of Vart. Massive blood loss, casting magic while on death's door, forcible mending of the flesh, and casting spells in succession beyond his limits had left Dia in a battered state.

The doctors said Dia needed to be hospitalized immediately. I consented, but I panicked when I saw the stated medical expenses. I managed to pay the advance, but the funds I had on hand weren't nearly enough to cover the amount I'd owe in the end.

I told the doctors that I was good for the money, then left to sell stuff from my inventory. My monetary concerns were soon resolved, however. The magic gem that Tida had dropped fetched one hell of a sum. It was apparently unprecedented and purer than the up-until-then highest-ranked magic gem ever identified. The negotiations even pulled in the nation's big shots. There was quarreling, and much fuss about this and that was raised, but I managed to exchange the gem for a small fortune, then returned to the hospital.

I paid the fees and got all the formalities done at the reception desk, securing Dia's spot there. With the specter of him being chased out now banished, I gained some peace of mind for the time being. Then, the receptionist guided me to Dia's ward.

As it was the largest hospital in the land, the room that had been arranged for him was top class. The building was made of wood, but as they were thorough about cleaning, I felt there was no need to worry about hygiene issues. It was worlds apart from hospitals back home, but by this world's standards it was well above average.

The room contained simple nursing tools as well as a magic apparatus I'd never seen before. In this world, advancements in magical healing had led to these sorts of support instruments. The beige curtains swayed in the breeze,

and below them lay a bed, atop which Dia dozed. Thanks to the measures his doctors had taken, his complexion had markedly improved.

A wizened old physician was sitting in a wooden chair beside the bed. He noticed me and spoke. “Ahh, you must be Miss Dia’s companion. Were you able to pay without difficulty?”

“I was. I sold my possessions for money, so there were no issues there.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Now, I’d like to explain Miss Dia’s condition in some detail. May I?”

“Please do.”

The doctor brought another wooden chair into the room and prompted me to sit. I took a seat and listened to what he had to say.

“I’ll get straight to the point. Regarding the loss of her right arm, restoring it to normal isn’t possible. Even under the best of circumstances and with the greatest of magics, reattaching arms is far from easy. Too much time passed since the arm was severed, and the forcible, unguided healing spell caused the wound to close haphazardly. Though her arm is what you were most concerned about, I’m afraid you’ll have to give up on it.”

“I understand.” I bit my lip.

I didn’t know how advanced medicine in this world was. I had just held on to a sliver of hope that since magic was a thing in this world, maybe it could help him. But I’d been dreaming. If it *could* be restored so easily, why would there be Dungeon divers around town with legs or arms missing?

“Then there’s the laceration from her shoulder to her torso. This will leave a large scar, and that too was caused by the healing spell Miss Dia herself cast. It was too much to hope that the magic she formulated while near death would heal with delicacy and precision.”

“A scar? I don’t think Dia’ll mind that.”

Since he was identifying as a guy, I figured he wouldn’t lose sleep over it.

“Oh? Well, if she’s okay with that, then no matter. On to the next topic. The blood loss has induced magic power deficiency. We can treat that with a

specialized diet, and she can make do using a magic tool if needed. It'll probably take around a week for her to recover completely in that regard."

Blood loss-induced "magic power deficiency"? That was the first I'd heard the term. I assumed it meant that his MP would recuperate more slowly. I knew from what I'd gleaned at the library that blood and magic power were deeply connected, but I didn't foresee any such complications. As my knowledge was inadequate, I deferred to the doctor.

"Thank you. Please do what's necessary."

"Understood. Lastly, I fear that losing her arm will affect her mental and physical equilibrium. We've prepared a prosthetic, but her sword skills and spell-casting will undoubtedly suffer. I imagine that for a Dungeon diver like her, this will be a tremendous shock."

"You're not wrong, sir."

"I think you should consider your future plans carefully. That's her full prognosis. For the time being, we'll keep her here for one week's time. If you wish for rehabilitation, you'll need to fill out more paperwork, so please do that at the reception desk."

The consequences I'd feared were thrust before me painfully plainly, and it hurt my heart.

"Oh, and one more thing—are *you* okay, Mr. Vizzita? Your wounds may have closed through healing magic, but they look exceedingly painful to me."

A pause. "No, I'm okay. I'm just a little down in the dumps for different reasons."

And that wasn't a lie. My HP and MP had begun to recover naturally, and I didn't feel any worse for wear physically. As for the reason, I didn't know whether it was because my body was simply built tough or if it was some game system thing.

"Just take it easy. Adieu."

"Thank you very much, Doctor."

The doctor left, and the room fell totally silent save for the wind blowing

through the window.

Then, a voice from behind: “Blestspell: *Full Cure*.”

Warm light blanketed the room.

“That old-timer’s being so dramatic. Sure, my balance is wrecked, but it’s not a problem.”

“So you were awake, huh?”

Dia was sitting up in bed. He was dressed in white hospital clothes, and his erstwhile ponytail had come undone. I pointed at the magic light he was playing with.

“That’s...” I muttered.

“Sorry, Sieg. Sorry I hid this up until now.” He hung his head.

I felt the urge to run away from this. I’d known he had more magic in his arsenal, but I’d internally signed off on his charade. To Dia, however, he saw this as a secret he’d kept from his dear ally up until our lives were hanging in the balance. He wasn’t about to chin up.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, I was surprised, but I knew you must have had an extensive background in magic. I assume you had your reasons for hiding it?”

“My reasons... My reasons, huh? My reasons were really dumb.” He lifted his head a little bit and flicked the ball of light like a beanbag.

“Well, it’s thanks to you that I’m alive. I don’t mind if you only use those powers when push comes to shove. From here on out, you can—”

“No, I’ll use them whenever. I won’t stop,” he murmured resolutely, crushing the beanbag of light in hand. “That’s what I’ve decided.”

And just like that, he declared he would use the magic that he’d made a point of hiding thus far. The magic he had refused to use until death was approaching. What on earth had changed his mind? I did have a guess. Unintentionally, my gaze fell on his lost right arm. Dia noticed and started talking in calm tones.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Sieg. It’s not because of my arm. I was Dungeon

diving, so I was prepared for a nick like this. So don't give me that sad look on your face about it. If you get bummed out because of me, that'll bum me out too."

Dia was trying to console *me*, but I wasn't as ambivalent as him. "But that was your dominant arm! What about the blade—"

"I'm fine without the blade," he interrupted.

"Wha?"

"I've got my holy magic! It'll take time for me to get back to normal, but as you can see, I'm all right. In fact, this is the perfect chance for me to start focusing purely on magic. It's a great opportunity for me to reexamine my fighting style and mindset. Guess I'll mull it all over while I'm here resting."

"Wait, huh?!"

Dia had pulled a one-eighty. This was the exact opposite of his prior line of thinking, leaving me speechless and uncomfortable. It was almost like magic in itself—like the sudden and complete change in attitude precipitated by my "???" skill. To have been so fixated on the blade only to give up on it so readily struck me as bizarre. If that change of mind was the result of thinking things through calmly and realistically, then I was happy for him, but I didn't think Dia was capable of such pure rationality. Seeing him so composed felt odd. I remembered the despair and emptiness in his eyes as he had watched his arm fly away, yet not a shred of those emotions was apparent at present.

I doubted the fault lay in my observation skills. It wasn't that I had any particular eye for character; it was just that Dia was supposed to be in the easy-to-understand category. Yet he clearly *was* done with the blade. Did he change his mind because he'd been on death's door? Sure, that was often the case in books and stories, but the sensation of witnessing it firsthand felt like I'd fastened my buttons in mismatched buttonholes from the outset.

"What's wrong, Sieg?"

"Oh no, nothing. If that's how you feel, then I'm fine with it. Just...rest up and think about it. I paid for everything, so you can take however many days you need. Oh, yeah! I forgot to tell you! You'll love this! I sold ol' Tida's magic gem

and made a mint!” I said, reporting our spoils in order to dispel any anxiety. Since money was one of the things Dia was after, I believed he’d be delighted.

“Oh, that’s nice. You keep that money for now, though. I’m bedridden, so I don’t need it at the moment. In fact, if you need to, you can use my half of the spoils too.”

“Huh? But didn’t you need lots of money?”

“Yeah, eventually. I just don’t need it *now*.”

I didn’t see the glint of purpose in his eyes. There was no sense of that unshakable fixation from before. I contemplated what sort of emotional shift had happened within him. The obvious answer? After losing his arm, he was throwing in the towel with regard to something important to him.

“I have to rest for now, that’s all. But just you wait, Sieg, because I’ll be back in no time. I just hate that I won’t be able to help you until then.”

With that last sentence, a very Dia-like expression came over his face. This was the Dia I knew—the one who put way too much faith in me, who apologized for not being able to help me.

“Actually, that’s okay,” I said. “If you’re not there with me, I think I’ll take a break from Dungeon diving too. I’m sure it’d be rough going by myself.”

“No, that’s not true!”

I wasn’t expecting Dia to say that. And there was purpose in his eyes again, though I didn’t know what that purpose could mean.

“I think you’re more than able to advance through the Dungeon by yourself, Sieg. I know that on the day you tried entering the Dungeon for the first time, you were scared. But now you’re good.”

I was flummoxed, both by how Dia had sensed my trepidation regarding the Dungeon and how sure he was that I could take it on by myself.

“The Dungeon? By myself?”

“You can take down monsters on your own, and there’s not much you can’t handle. In fact, I’ve been wondering why someone as strong as you wanted to partner with me. This whole time, I’ve been wondering. But I couldn’t bring

myself to ask why because I needed you.”

Why did I use you, Dia? Well...because of your talents.

There was that, but the real reason was that I was too scared to enter the Dungeon alone. I hadn’t been emotionally ready for it. In hindsight, that was now crystal clear to me.

“I’m a coward. Without a companion, I wouldn’t feel safe.”

“If that’s true, then you should be okay now. I guarantee it. You’re strong, Sieg. Why don’t you try going it alone? This is a good chance for you. I want you to reexamine things. And *then* you can decide if you need me or not. Otherwise, I...”

Dia had his own doubts and hardships. And I saw that he was now trying to confide in me. I could tell he was being very straight with me, so I figured I’d take that to heart.

“All right. I’ll try making it farther on my own. I don’t know how far I’ll get, though.”

“Great; I’m relieved,” he said, flashing a carefree smile. “I don’t want you sitting on your hands on my account. You’ve got your own dreams to pursue.” He was saying it for my own sake and legitimately pleased to see me make progress. “Oh, yeah,” he continued, “I just remembered. Use this. I don’t need it anymore.”

He tossed the sword that had been leaning against the wall to me. It was the so-called “Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan,” the sword to which Dia had some kind of emotional attachment.

“Thanks, but are you sure?” I could sense that with this act, he wasn’t *just* handing me a sword.

“Totally. If it keeps you safe while I’m away, then I’m glad.”

There was no hesitation there. In fact, I could even sense the firm determination I associated with him.

“Okay, thank you. I’ll borrow it for now.”

It was certainly true that it made more sense to lend it to me. He’d be in bed,

not fighting. I had no reason to say no. So I took the blade and gave it a once-over. It was a tad antiquated, but I could tell it had been in use for some time. While the priority was clearly the blade's practical use, it did have silverwork (though not enough to get in the way of the sword's utility). It was a simple yet beautiful Western-style one-handed blade.

【TREASURED BLADE OF THE ARRACE CLAN】

Attack Power 5. 20% of user's DEX added to Attack Power.

"I will protect you, Sieg," he said to himself under his breath as I held the sword in my gaze. "Mark my words. I will protect you and your dream."

"Huh?" What caught my attention even more than Dia's little pronouncement was how his first-person pronoun had changed. It had, for that statement, gone from the brash, manly word for "I" he usually used to the more neutral version people who identify as female often used.

"All right, I'm gonna hit the hay," he said, switching back to male-coded speech as if that hadn't just happened. "Gotta heal up quick."

And with that, he lay himself back down. I wanted to talk a little longer, but Dia did need his rest, and he wanted to get back to normal, so I didn't press. Had I simply misheard him before? *Best to ask some other day.*

"Got it. You get a nice long rest, and I'll report back in a few days. I'll go see how far I can get."

I made to leave the room with that promise, but just before exiting, I caught sight of Dia holding something in hand as he tried to fall asleep. It was the Hairclip of I'lia I'd given to him as a gift. He was grasping it tightly and willfully, as if his life depended on it.

As if he'd found a replacement for the sword that was now lost to him.



After my conversation with Dia, I began working out how to tackle the Dungeon alone. I didn't half-ass it by making excuses about why I couldn't. I put

in the effort of devising a means to fight and progress that seriously took my competencies into account. Dia and I had to show each other that silly little flesh wounds like these wouldn't change a thing. I believed that was fulfilling my bedridden companion's wishes.

I used the money I'd obtained from selling off Tida's magic gem to assemble all the essentials for Dungeon diving, and I had nothing to complain about when it came to my physical condition. I'd thought that cutting into my max HP might result in some sort of health-related fallout, but I was the picture of health. My HP and MP had fully recovered by the following day. That was largely due to the fact that, unlike Dia, I hadn't sustained any truly grievous injuries.

I have Dia to thank for all of it.

And so there I was, standing in front of the Dungeon so early in the morning that the sun wasn't up yet. Scant light radiated out from a point beyond the horizon. The sky, so indigo as to nearly be black, faded in color to a milky white.

There was no one else at the entrance. Wanting to avoid contact with others, I had arrived as early as I could. I breathed in the brisk morning air and performed my final round of menu checks.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 302/322

MP: 506/512

CLASS:

LEVEL 10

STR 6.19

VIT 6.28

DEX 7.21

AGI 9.44

INT 9.33

MAG 21.66

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 8.59

EXP: 17501/20000

EQUIPMENT: Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, Otherworld Garb, Largish Mantle, Otherworld Footwear, Leather Gauntlet, Leather Chestplate

Killing Tida had netted me tens of thousands of experience points, bringing me all the way to Level 10. My stats had risen by leaps and bounds compared to when I was only Level 6; I felt as though I could probably even keep up with Tida's movements in earnest now.

On the other hand, my "confusion" had increased dramatically as well, which put me ill at ease. The number went down little by little with the passage of time, but my "???" skill was triggering so frequently that it was nearing the double-digit mark despite that.

I set two goals for myself. First, no more relying on "???" And second, I'd make it to the tenth floor by myself.

I hadn't dived solo since my first day in this world. I could still vividly recall everything that had happened that day, but it had only occurred because I'd been Level 1. As I stood now, I was confident I wouldn't find myself in such a life-threatening situation.

With the trials and tribulations to come in mind, I couldn't afford to cry that being alone was too scary, like some toddler. Up until now, I'd focused too much on leveling up in-game. But that wasn't all I needed to do. There were those *numbers beyond my numbers* too. I had to forge a strong heart, and to that end, I embarked on a new solo challenge.

A new *solo* challenge.

Emphasis on solo.

“So, what, you going solo now?”

I was supposed to be all alone here, yet I heard a voice that wasn't mine.

“D-Dimension: Calculash!” I said, promptly activating my perception field. I hadn't deployed it yet since I wasn't inside the Dungeon.

I drew my sword and searched for the source of the voice, scouring every nook and cranny of my surroundings for information with my magic. And then, I spotted it: a flame flickering behind me on the road. The flame wasn't burning anything. It was about the size of a person, and it was flickering in midair.

“Ah, my bad. Must've startled you. I come in peace, so calm down, would ya?”

My sharpened senses seized on the source of the voice: the fire before my eyes. The fire formed a mouth, which bent and contorted to speak like a human might.

“A... A talking flame?”

“Wait, hold on, I'll revert back.”

The voice felt familiar now. The fire shifted to a human shape, and glyph-inscribed bandages gathered from out of nowhere, coiling around the human-shaped flame and standing in for clothes. Lastly, the head portion of the fire became “human” as well, and the transformation was complete.

It was the red-haired girl from our earlier encounter. The Decimal Guardian, Alty.

“Sup.”

“H-Hello there.”

I was of two minds. Thinking about it in terms of game design, it was safe to assume the Guardian of the tenth floor was weaker than the Guardian of the twentieth. Of course, I didn't know how much stock to put into that conclusion.

This time was different from the Tida battle in that I didn't have Dia. I didn't have as much firepower on my side, but as I was alone, I could retreat more freely. Since I didn't have allies to worry about and my physical prowess was

relatively high, I had a lot of latitude for diverse battle tactics. And above all, this location was great for me. In due time, a crowd of people would gather here at the entrance, and outside of the Dungeon, there were plenty of places to run.

Realizing Alty probably *didn't* mean me any harm, I decided to continue conversing with her. I didn't drop my guard just yet, though.

“‘Alty,’ right? Did you come here to fight me?”

The floating Alty shook her head. She looked weirdly adorable doing so, leaving me bemused. If, hypothetically, we engaged in battle, her appearance left me at a virtual disadvantage. I couldn't see her as anything but a little girl, and that was breaking the rules if you asked me.

“Uh, no. I literally just said, ‘I come in peace.’”

For someone so petite, she spoke pretty haughtily. The sense of incongruity was fierce, but I was grateful for that, since it helped me not to forget the “girl” I was dealing with was a monster.

“I don't believe this,” I said. “It was only a few days ago that I was attacked by a real delight of a monster named Tida. Did you think I'd forget who sealed the exits?”

“Hmph... All I did was set the stage, but whatever. If you're angry, I'll apologize. My bad.”

“Uh, sorry, but an apology ain't cutting it. How could I possibly trust you?”

“Urgh...so, looks like your impression of me's pretty bad, huh? I'm a wee bit shocked. I didn't even attack you, man,” she said, pouting.

Ah. She's the same. The same as good ol' Tida.

“No shit it's bad. There's no way I'd have a favorable impression of a monster. What happened to what your friend Tida said? ‘When a person and a monster cross paths, they fight,’ right?”

“Hee hee. Don't take what Tida said so seriously,” she admonished me, looking at me with warm eyes like I was some kid who still believed in Santa. “That's just some rule it came up with on the fly.”

Getting stared at by eyes like that, by a girl two sizes smaller than even me, had a way of blowing a guy's top. "So you're saying you don't intend to fight me—and you want me to just *believe* you?"

"Yes, I do. I'm not a battle junkie like Tida. I've got no desire to play the monster role, so you can do me a solid and relax."

"Yeah huh...and who's *keeping* me from relaxing and entering the Dungeon right now?"

"Oh, don't worry about that either. Now that we're allies, exploring the Dungeon'll be a cinch. The ordinary bosses there'll be a walk in the park. Ah, but only in places far from the Pathway Proper, mind you?"

"Wait, wait, hold on a sec."

"Huh? What's the matter?"

My headache refused to abate. The one-sided way she spoke was the same as Tida. Neither really listened to what others said, deciding things purely egocentrically.

"Why're you trying to wedge yourself into my party? Forget it. It's outta the question."

"Because it'd appear you don't trust me. So I thought I'd show you not just through my words but through my actions that I mean you no harm. As of a minute ago, I've decided to help you explore the Dungeon."

"How am I supposed to fight with *you* behind me? Not in a million years."

"I don't mind being in front. I'm pretty good with a sword too."

Alty fashioned a blade out of flame and stabbed the air repeatedly. On the surface, it was a charming scene of a little kid messing around with a sword. But I couldn't let that fool me. Scorching flame was leaking out of her. Great big bwooshes from her hands and feet. I couldn't treat her the same as a fellow human.

"As long as you're anywhere near me, I have to be ready to fight at any time. How can I explore the Dungeon like that?"

"Hey, this is a serious problem for me too, you know. I'm gonna stick by you

until you finally trust me. A relationship built on trust's important, after all. I'm gonna devote myself to you, however many days or years it takes." Alty smiled innocently.

She'd said all that without faltering; I didn't get the sense she was lying and I definitely didn't sense any hostility from her. Then again, I could very well have been failing to detect her sinister designs because I was too inexperienced. In the end, my misgivings remained.

I didn't know how to handle the situation. I was lost. It would have been so much easier if she'd simply attacked me. All of the anti-Guardian plans I'd come up with before today's venture were now useless.

"So in other words, you'd be hanging around me? Up until you gain my trust?"

"Yep."

"Uhh...can I maybe just take you down right now? You *are* a boss, after all."

"Really? When I'm being this friendly? That's just mean. You've got a cute girl wanting to join your party. This is where you graciously accept my offer. Look, I just want you to trust me. Honest. I've got a modest wish, all I want is to realize it, and in order to accomplish it, I absolutely need a human's assistance."

Alty raised her hands in an "I surrender" pose, waving her hands to show that she was harmless. I considered slashing her while she was good and defenseless, but I thought twice about it, as something she'd said stood out to me. Tida's dying words came to mind.

"A *wish*? How did I know?"

"Oh, you wanna hear about it?"

I paused. Would hearing her out serve me? The Dungeon was chock-full of enigmas, so I'd certainly need more information in order to clear it. But did it mean that trying to draw the information out of Alty here and now was the correct play?

"Let's put aside the whole trust thing for now," she said. "For the time being, you can just listen to what I have to say. I'm fine with that."

“Okay, I might as well hear you out. What you said earlier got me wondering. And tell me about the you-won’t-fight-because-you-have-doubts thing too.”

As Alty was a Guardian, every word she uttered was a spoiler, so to speak. I hated myself for thinking of a situation like this in video game terms, but the very same brain that had birthed that thought was telling me to pay attention to whatever she said.

“Hee hee. Sure, I’ll tell you.” Alty bent her childlike body and gave me a bewitching smile.

“Okay,” she said unhurriedly. “We’ll start with the doubts thing. I’m sure you’ll find this juicy. Just think—you’ll be able to kill a Guardian without fighting.”

Her smile was unrelenting, and that wouldn’t change when the topic was how to kill her.

“Truth is, we Guardians are stuck guarding the Dungeon as monsters because we’ve got lingering regrets or attachments. So I always wondered what’d become of a Guardian if whatever’s keeping them were set straight. Tida cleared that nagging question up for me. Seems like if the tethers grounding us come unraveled, we weaken, and if our wishes come true, we vanish. That must be why the nigh immortal Tida died so easily.”

From what she was intimating, she’d witnessed Tida’s death. And she’d divulged that under normal circumstances, Tida could not have died the way it had. It had died because I’d granted its desire—or so Alty was convinced.

That was the first I’d heard of any of this. Nobody had told me that. I had a feeling this was information not one person among all the folks in all the Dungeon Alliance who were trying to clear the Dungeon knew.

“Heh heh...and now for what *my* wish is. I’ve got one wish. One single, solitary wish.”

And then, as if to say every word before then was mere preamble, Alty’s voice turned deeper and weightier. She would be telling me her dearest wish—or in other words, the death she would meet.

“I want to make an unrequited love not so unrequited.”

That was too ephemeral for a final moment.

Alty was looking up at the sky, embarrassed by her own proclamation. “Whaddya think? Romantic, ain’t it?” she said, poking fun at herself.

Her wish and mannerisms were so endearing I was at my wits’ end. My head hurt. My head hurt a *lot*. And this was no run-of-the-mill headache. It was an unholy mix of emotions that didn’t usually go together—I was at once anxious, halfway maddened, and amused. And all the while, Alty was staring straight at me.

As I was wrestling with my cranial distress, I thought one thing: *What a pest*. That one sentiment expressed everything this overly human-looking monster was.

And so, the sun rose, the break of dawn signaling the arrival of a fresh new day in dazzling fashion. I’d intended to get a fresh start alongside the sunrise and dive into the Dungeon. I’d wanted to turn the page to chapter two of my explorations. But an unforeseen setback had stalled the Dungeon adventures of one Siegfried Vizzita.

I could practically hear the crumbling of my carefully laid out exploration plans, along with the sound of the gears grinding out of whack. So too spun the wheel of fate, whirring as it rolled down the hill. Thus did our tale begin to turn. Down, down, always further down, to the bottom. The wheel could not be stopped in its inexorable descent toward the deepest level.

This marked the start of a story about digging down to the deepest level that none should reach—the truth.

Granting the desire of the boy named Aikawa Kanami meant reaching the deepest level.

My Dungeon diving experience was only just beginning.

Afterword

Tarisa Warinai here. It's a pleasure to meet you.

Volume 1 of *Dungeon Dive* has made it to physical-book publication. This will be my first ever afterword, so I won't veer too far from the work you're reading.

Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Deepest Level. It's very orthodox isekai fare, and I think I managed to put together an adventure that's in line with that title (albeit just barely). Using the "boy summoned to another world" and video gamey dungeon elements, I feel like seeing how much of an adventure I can make for myself alongside the protagonist of my series.

Just what tribulations will befall young Kanami as the price he must pay for clearing the challenges ahead of him? I think there are readers who already know. This series debuted on the internet and has been serialized since 2012. As of my writing this afterword, *Dungeon Dive* is over a million characters in length. But since it's now being compiled in novel format, I'd like for Kanami to face trials that can only be realized in book form. He's a strong protagonist, so I'm sure you know he'll overcome every hardship and ordeal no matter what they may be.

Now, as for the process of spinning this tale, it's simple. My driving thought is: "Let's dungeon dive alongside some heroines!" It is *not* "Let's dungeon dive to get away from the heroines!" Nor is it "Let's pick on Kanami using the heroines!" It's "Let's dungeon dive alongside some heroines!" That's the hope, anyway.

Therefore, I can't deny that the girl characters slightly outnumber the guys. Needless to say, the heroine of volume 1 is Dia. In addition, the girls named Lastiara and Maria are also treated as heroines in this story. They lay fairly low in volume 1, but they'll play a very active part starting in the next volume. Plus, other heroines are waiting in the wings as well.

All that said, as this is a novelization of a web series, the character introductions need a special flair to them. To a certain extent, the list of

characters has been set in stone, so I can now give them introductions without mincing words.

Over on the internet side of things, Snow and Lowen are strangely popular. I'd like you book-readers to experience those two sooner rather than later.

Next, the title of this series. In truth, I had a different title in store, one that isn't *Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Deepest Level*. This title was a provisional one that I came up with so that web readers would find it easy to read. But I lost sight of the timing of when to change the title, so it ended up in book form without the title changing. Since I figured there were more readers among those who read my story submissions on the internet who would become restless if the title were different than readers who wouldn't, I ended up making the book version *Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Deepest Level* as well. If I made use of cool English letters and katakana for the title *now*, the only one it'd please would be me. Regrettably, the "true" title I laid out will remain in the dark.

That being said, I think you can figure out what sort of title it would have been if you check out another work that Tarisa Warinai submitted on the internet. As there are tendencies to all things, you'd probably be able to tell, however faintly, "oh, since it's them we're talking about, they'd go with that kind of title." I can see it too. And it makes me think from the bottom of my heart: *Phew, that was close.*

I'm glad I didn't change it. That was, really, really too close for comfort. For real, though. There's nothing more dangerous than choosing a title while driven purely by enthusiasm and vibes. I'm sure you'll agree *Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Deepest Level* is the best title.

This does, however, have one drawback. This title is difficult to abbreviate in a way that sounds good in Japanese. Whenever I say the title out loud, I say the full title (*isekai meikyuu no saishinbu wo mezasou*, lit. "let's aim for the deepest level of the otherworld dungeon") even though I often end up fumbling over it. I'm still on the lookout for a good pet name for the series.

As long as we're talking about the series, let's talk about the alterations made to the web version for the book version. First, allow me to apologize. The alias

the protagonist uses has changed. Just from that one point, one might call it a different work altogether. That being said, I just couldn't keep the alias he uses in the web version (T/N: "Christ Eurasia"), so for the book version, he's "Sieg." His real name (Aikawa Kanami) hasn't changed, but readers who know and love the web version may feel somewhat put off. Again, I apologize profusely.

There are, however, lots of changes that are objectively for the better as well. Whether it's correcting typos or keeping inconsistencies with the numbers in check, it's become a lot easier to read (I'm sure it must have!). Compared to the web version, a great deal is different—so much so that I was taken aback. My editors and proofreaders have done an impeccable job.

Content-wise, there were also added events and changes to the configuration. I myself am looking forward to how things will be reborn from here on out.

Finally, a word of thanks. I received help from a lot of people up to this point. I could never have made it this far on my own.

This work was originally a web novel and has been adapted to physical books. As such, allow me to express my gratitude to those readers who provided support and advice online. Also, I thank S-san, the editor who steered the series to publication, and Ukai-san for drawing the illustrations.

Lastly, I of course thank you for picking up this book, and those of you who took the time to read through this sorry excuse for an afterword as well.

Till we meet again.





"BUT YOU'LL
CATCH A COLD
LIKE THAT."

"HA HA, I'M FINE,
SIEG. HONEST.
I'D NEVER CATCH
A COLD FROM THIS.
I AIN'T BOTHERED."

"BUT DIA...
IF YOU STAY
LIKE THAT...
YOUR CLOTHES,
THEY'RE
STICKING
TO YOU."

"STICKING...
TO ME?"

Dia

Aikawa Kanami

alias: Siegfried Vizzita

Aikawa Kanami

[STATUS]

NAME	Aikawa Kanami		
HP	302/322	MP	506/512
CLASS			
LEVEL 10			
STR	6.19		
VIT	6.28		
DEX	7.21		
AGI	9.44		
INT	9.33		
MAG	21.66		
APT	7.00		
CONDITION: Confusion	8.59		

EQUIPMENT

- Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan
- Otherworld Garb
- Largish Cloak
- Otherworld Shoes
- Leather Bracer
- Leather Chestplate



Diablo Sith

[STATUS]

NAME Diablo Sith
HP 45/112 MP 0/631
CLASS Swordfighter

LEVEL 6

STR	3.63
VIT	3.45
DEX	2.15
AGI	2.08
INT	5.67
MAG	34.36
APT	5.00
CONDITION: Protection	1.00

EQUIPMENT

Hairpin of l'lia
Mantle



Lastiara Whoseyards

[STATUS]

NAME Lastiara Whoseyards

HP 689/689 **MP** 315/315

CLASS Hero

LEVEL 15

STR 11.01

VIT 10.56

DEX 6.78

AGI 7.89

INT 12.38

MAG 8.78

APT 4.00

CONDITION:

EQUIPMENT

Maria Distrus



[STATUS]

NAME	Maria Distrus		
HP	41/41	MP	35/35
CLASS	Slave		

LEVEL 3

STR	0.89
VIT	2.01
DEX	1.23
AGI	0.73
INT	1.07
MAG	1.91
APT	1.52
CONDITION: Confusion	0.60
CONDITION: Languor	0.89

EQUIPMENT



Bonus Short Stories

Dia's Adventure

I finally made it there.

Luckily, I managed to find it within my lifetime. A colossal urban area stretching across the horizon.

This stage, this *setting*, was the stuff of dreams for me—it was the world of the hero tales I'd read as a kid. The group of allied nations surrounding the Dungeon. It was said that this was the locale where unrealized dreams could come true. Giddy, my head went light, but I psyched myself up and walked into town.

The Dungeon Alliance was made up of five countries, and the one that I'd just entered was called Vart. In all honesty, I was fine with any of them besides Whoseyards. I vowed I'd hack it as a diver, and to do that, I needed to first get myself some food and water.

I'd been tricked by traders and hadn't eaten anything in a long time. At this rate, I'd become a shriveled husk, so I decided to head for the money changer's joint in town to sell off what I had on me. I converted all of the decorative accessories I'd been given as "the Apostle," from my necklace to my bangles to everything in between. Looking back, those traders might have targeted me because I'd been wearing that kind of stuff. I thoroughly dumped all of my pointless bells and whistles so no trace of my having been their precious Apostle remained.

Then the kindly money changer pointed at the blade at my waist and asked, "You not gonna sell that sword of yours? It'd make ya a mint, don't ya know?"

It was the one thing I'd kept. In all likelihood, selling it would've left me nice and set for several months. It was doubtless an item of that caliber. Yet, I shook my head, as this was my sole possession that was unrelated to the Apostle. The Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan was thoroughly weathered and unhone-

but an old man had given it to me after learning of my dream.

I remembered it like it was yesterday. After all, it was the first time I'd been run quite that ragged and the first time I'd been dressed down quite that scathingly. I'd been visiting the aristocratic households for my Apostolic duties. Upon looking at the noble-knights training with envy in my eyes, I heard an old man with pure white hair call out to me.

"Hey there, little lady. Ya wanna try swingin' a sword?"

I nodded...only for the results to be woeful. Worn out, I collapsed onto the training range floor, and the old man looked astonished.

"Hrmm...can't say I've ever trained somebody this talentless. Not even I can do anything with what you're giving me," he said, indifferent to my being Apostlekin.

Part of me was happy, though. I felt like, at long last, somebody was seeing me not as the Apostle, but as just another person. Which is why I asked him what I asked him. I had a feeling he'd hit me with the unvarnished truth.

"Am I really that bad with the blade?"

"Yep. I'd give up hope if I were you. Fighting monsters using a sword, in particular, is beyond ya."

"But sir, if only once, I'd like to try my hand at fighting with a sword..."

He sighed. "Nothing for it, huh? Guess we'll make up for what ya lack with a quality blade. Here, take it. It's a damn fine one, and now it's yours. Wielding that beaut, the blade oughta pierce monster skin despite your piss-poor sword skills."

With that, the old man tossed me the blade he'd been holding. It was a beautiful sword sporting a family crest. One could tell it was top-notch at a glance.

"Wait, sir, are you sure it's okay? You have so many other students..."

"Oh no, I don't give my students spit. If I gave any of 'em a sword like *that*, they'd get the wrong idea, see. But you, you're so lousy that you couldn't possibly get the wrong idea. It's perfect for ya, Sithy."

“If that’s your reason, then I almost don’t want to take it...”

“Just accept it already. If ya don’t use a sword of that level, then you won’t be able to dream o’ so much as gettin’ the wrong idea.”

“But sir...”

The old man all but thrust the sword into my hands. “Look, my position forbids me from giving ya much of a hand, so don’t say nothin’. Let me at least help ya out with this wee little dream o’ yours.”

I hadn’t said a word about it, and yet the old man had gathered that I wanted to be a swordfighter, not some Apostle. Maybe something about my swordsmanship had intimated that.

“That bein’ said,” he muttered, “I’m hopin’ that sword finds its way into the hands of somebody who *can* help ya.”

He was essentially stating I’d never be able to make full use of the blade, and while my dissatisfaction was considerable, I understood he’d said it with more than a little concern for me. And he was, as far as I could tell, the only person in the whole wide world who was rooting for me to realize my dream.

That was why I couldn’t possibly sell his sword. Not until either my dream was down for the count or that “somebody” appeared. So I sold only my accessories and exited the store, spending the money on meals and the stuff I needed for Dungeon diving. I’d finally made the minimum preparations, and this place was the proper starting line from which I’d chase my dreams. After so long, my journey of self-actualization was beginning to unfold. I was no longer the Apostle Sith. I was the Dungeon diver Dia.

And so began the tale of my adventures...

Aim for the Top of the Academy

I awakened in a dark corridor and paced to and fro, walking, pacing around. I don’t remember where or how much I walked. In the midst of it all, I lost my sense of time. In the end, after I was poisoned, I couldn’t find a single person to help. Confused and frightened by my ever-dropping HP, I relinquished my consciousness while in the grips of quivering despair.

And then... And then, I was found.

My fate changed drastically. I got my start not in a nation called Whoseyards or Vart, but in Eltraliew. With that alteration alone, my path veered immensely. This is the tale of the life I chose, revolving not around diving or mastering the Dungeon, but a life of study.



I was at the largest academy on the landmass, crossing swords with a blonde-haired knight at the center of a combat arena on the premises. I could catch glimpses here and there of the young students spectating from the surrounding stands—probably there to witness the “cocky newbie” they were sure would crumple into an unsightly heap on the floor. It was easy to tell from the scorn in their eyes.

Cheered on by the crowd, the proud blond knight swung his blade, his breathing labored, while I, in contrast, was cool and collected. I dodged his furious sword strokes with so much leeway that I was pondering to myself as I did it. It wasn’t my opponent I was thinking about either. All that was on my mind at that moment was the vast and voluminous debt I owed.

For the money I owed was the greatest challenge, the most towering barrier I faced. To me, my true enemy was my *debt*. It increased every day through interest, and it was starting to reach the level no ordinary person could ever repay. On the day I was found, the day I knew that would be my lot, I tried fleeing to another nation despite my gratitude for having been saved. But my escape attempt failed. The teachers of the academy encircled me, and the headmaster of Eltraliew Academy threatened me thus: “Hmm. If you wish to flee, then I reckon I’ll have you pay the cost of your medical treatment first. And also, if you don’t enroll, you’ll be tried for the crime of trespassing on school grounds. If you resist, you’ll have to face all of the teachers here. What say you, I wonder?”

Loath as I was to do it, I could only nod. I caved, compelled to sign the enrollment documents even as I clenched my fists with rage. From that day forward, my name was Kanami Eltraliew. That was the result of a bafflingly stupid grift—one couldn’t read the contract all the way to the end without

focusing magic power into their eyes.

Under duress, I was made an adopted child of the headmaster and banned from leaving the country. And so began my days of being resented by highborn students who envied me for reasons I didn't really understand.

I latched onto a means of generating money, since I thought that if my debt disappeared, I could make my escape. Clearing my debts was a necessary step towards returning to my home world. Yet there was no way I could speedily or easily accumulate funds in a world whose ways eluded me. It was doubtful I could even eke out a day-to-day existence, let alone immediately construct a repayment scheme. That was where that stinking imp of a headmaster wedged himself in.

"Oho. No money? Then I'll conduct academy duels, I will. If you achieve a top ranking in the Elt-Order, I'll do you one better than giving you a no-interest loan. I'll provide for you. It'll be 'money awarded,' so to speak."

Apparently, if I dueled my fellow students, my rank could increase, and I'd earn more depending on that rank. That was what I was told.

"That sounds like an awfully convenient system for me."

"I bet it does. I just invented it a minute ago for your sake," the headmaster replied brazenly. "If I do things this way, you'll strive your hardest for me, won't you? Lately, the academy's stagnated and all the fun in it's gone. What say you do me a favor and light a fire under the slacker noble kids?"

I angrily responded that I didn't have that kind of time, patiently explaining to him that before anything else, I had to return to my world, and that in order to accomplish it, I needed to set my sights on the Dungeon's deepest floor.

The headmaster's expression turned nasty. "This is a deal, sonny boy. If you stand at the top of the Elt-Order and fully repay your debt, I'll deign to assist you in effecting your return to your world."

To be honest, it was an enticing proposition. Much as it annoyed me, the fact remained that the academy-nation of Eltraliew hosted the most advanced magic tech in this world. And if the headmaster, the apex of that realm, lent me his aid, I might come upon a way to return to my world without needing to

reach the deepest depths of the Dungeon.

“I don’t lie and I’m not starting now,” said the headmaster. “You have my word, on the honor of the Eltraliew name.”

A pledge and a contract were crafted, and so I came to have to participate in these lame “Elt-Order” battles in the arena, fighting duels I wanted no part in. Luckily, I had no shortage of opponents to mow down. There were plenty of noble students who had it in for the boy to whom the Academy showed such favoritism.

The duel was decided in no time. My opponent, a Level 4 knight, was ranked 1,332.

That knight was the blond kid with whom I was currently crossing blades. His name was Elk. It’d be understandable to assume someone who was Level 4 would be four times as strong as me, still at Level 1. In all honesty, I took on the duel not minding if I was defeated. My real goal for accepting today’s contest so readily was to get a feel for it. It struck me as odd just how much I was dominating the match. It was so easy my mind went back to my money troubles even as I fought.

“Quit weaving around!” good sir Elk barked. “Damn transfer student!”

My recent experience teetering on death’s doorstep at the Dungeon was proving handy. Unfazed by his vehemence and unafraid of the dull-bladed sword, I kept dodging his attacks at the last moment. This wasn’t thanks to my own battle prowess. Rather, it was thanks almost entirely to my dimensional magic and menu-sight. Reading others’ status menus clued me into their strengths ahead of time, and my being able to grasp my enemy’s moments through *Dimension* was basically cheating. By making full use of those abilities, I could defy whatever my opponent was thinking and outplay them. I pretended I was leaving myself wide open and invited a sweeping blow, only to evade it by a hair and get in close. That was all it took for me to take the flower on my opponent’s chest, thereby securing victory.

“Huh? Wha, how?!” stammered Mister Elk, who clearly had no clue what had just happened.

“I won,” I murmured, even more amazed than he was.

I walked away from him, wondering how much money this would net me. I took out the document the headmaster had given me—a document whose title was really taking the piss (“The Prize Money List for Sonny Dearest”). According to it, if I beat a fighter who ranked in the 1000s, I was owed one piece of silver. That was roughly enough to cover my meals for a handful of days. I went to the headmaster’s office to put out feelers about payment, only to be told I’d be remunerated right away, which gave me a tiny bit more peace of mind. After all, I hadn’t eaten a proper meal in days. I’d been thrown into school life with nary a thing to my name; to me, a single silver coin was a small fortune.

“I... I can? Then...if I keep beating higher-ranked fighters, then...!”

There was a section within the List containing names that came with particularly large prizes. At the top of that section was a person who, if defeated, would clear all my debts in one go.

“Let’s see here. Ranked as ‘beyond rank,’ alias ‘Azure Fury.’ The dragonewt Snow Walker, huh? Going by an alias like that, they seem scary as hell. That said, if I can beat this person, I won’t have to worry about money anymore.”

And so my mind rushed ahead to the big fish I had yet to encounter. I’d said I would take on the Elt-Order challenge, but I had no intention of spending too much time on it. If I was going to do this, I’d blitz from Point A to Point B as fast as I could. I resolved to get strong quick. Strong enough to beat this “Snow Walker.”

“Hey! Transfer student! I demand a rematch! Like I’d accept this as valid! Forget dropping the flower; whoever’s disarmed loses!”

I could hear that noble yawping at me, but I was too absorbed in the List. If I beat someone a second time, it got me no more money than before. I was determined to get back to my world with all speed; a rematch was out of the question. I ignored the riled-up crowd and my annoying “social better” and set my goal: one month. Lessons, communicating with other students, all of it would take a back seat. I was going to escape this sty of an academy and return to my world, for my sister’s sake as well as my own, no matter what!

And so began the tale of how I laid waste to the Elt-Order. A divergent tale, an anomalous path opened so that I may go back to my world.

Lastiara's Prologue

"...Mr. Hine. Before the end..."

I could tell. I knew it wouldn't be long now. That much was obvious. Which was why I—Lastiara Whoseyards—told my instructor, "Before the end, I want to see the outside."

It was the first time I'd uttered something so willful.

In a room within a cathedral located in Whoseyards's ninth district, a chamber that only the particularly high-ranking were allowed to enter, I gazed out the window. All I could see was the garden within the cathedral's premises. Since the garden was surrounded by tall trees, I couldn't even glimpse Whoseyards's townscape.

As I made my chair (which was so expensive you could sell it for a house) rattle and clack, I let spill what I really thought. Upon hearing me lay it bare, Hine stood there, mouth agape. I didn't know if he was unhappy with me or simply astonished. I regretted saying it almost immediately.

But Hine didn't disregard my request. "I'll talk it over with my superiors. Please give me some time, milady," he replied earnestly after mulling it over. Then he stepped quickly out of the room, leaping straight into action.

I'd thought he'd yell at me. "*What foolish prattle is this?*" I'd planned to resign myself, to give up. Yet Hine hadn't voiced any dissatisfaction whatsoever. Instead, he was trying to bring my wishes to fruition.

It was odd. The Hine I knew—no, the Whoseyards I knew—would never grant me any freedom. The priests of the cathedral disliked instability. There was no way they'd allow something that might hinder the plan, not after coming this far. The roiling in my heart right now? Never in a million years would they tolerate it. As such, I waited for Hine's return without getting my hopes up. It was futile. I was sure Hine didn't even intend to actually advocate for me. In all likelihood, he'd just gone to report to the top for clerical reasons—I'd filed a request, so to speak. No doubt that was all there was to it. When Hine came back, he'd tell me, "*I fielded it with them, but sure enough, it's no use. I'm*

terribly sorry, milady.”

I could tell. I knew the end was approaching. That much was obvious.

I tamped down my silly hope and vacantly watched the sky. Time slowed to a crawl. I didn't have much time left, yet that last remaining scrap of time spanned too long to bear. Just like always, I ate, studied, prayed, and slept, and all the while, time dragged at a languid pace. Dull, tedious time, devoid of stimulus. Nothing ever changed.

I took an adventure tale that I quite liked from the bookshelf. I'd read all of the books on the shelf cover to cover. Sadly enough, I even had them memorized. At this point, the only form of enjoyment this prison of a room had left was Hine's made-up stories.

Time stretched and stretched like flattening dough. Until, finally, Hine returned.

I know, I kept repeating inwardly. I know. It was pointless to—

“Milady, let's go.”

“Huh?” For a moment, I didn't even understand what he'd said. Pleasant chills crept up my spine.

“We've received permission. Let's go outside.”

“Is... Is it really true, Mr. Hine?”

“Yes, it is—it's the end of the line, after all. Let's go wherever you'd like, milady.”

With a cheerful smile, Hine threw open the chamber's door, beckoning me outside.

“Wherever I'd like?”

“Yes, milady. Wherever you'd like.”

My eyes turned to the adventure book in my hand. “Th-Then, may we go to the Dungeon?”

“The central Dungeon, you say? Of course; that won't be an issue. We will

need to make all sorts of preparations: food, weapons, and a slew of small items necessary for Dungeon exploration as well.”

“We really can?” I asked, my true self leaking out.

“Yes, milady. So let’s go. Since this will mark the end,” he said, nodding and turning his face away.

I saw how strained his expression became a split second before he averted his gaze. I had no idea what was happening anymore. It was all so unexpected that my brain couldn’t catch up.

“Let’s go,” said Hine, leading me by the hand. “And let’s go see for ourselves.”

The adventure book I so loved clattered to the floor. My heartbeat was racing. I could feel the dough of time compressing back into a ball. What had flowed so sluggishly was quickening, accelerating.

And just like that, I exited the room and stepped outside, leaving behind the prison whose bars had seemed so solid, like it had been nothing.



I was half-expecting my time on the outside to unfold like something out of a dream—like one of my adventure tales. But reality wasn’t so forthcoming.

“There’s no need, milady. We’ll be the ones to prepare it.”

“Wait, but if we’re going to the Dungeon, I need to gather all my tools...”

“We could never burden you with carrying all our things, milady.”

A pair of seasoned knights of the cathedral flanked me at all times, standing watch over what I did. They were higher-ranked than even Hine, who was the youngest to become one of the Seven Celestial Knights. Hine was strong, but he was also inexperienced, so he was relegated to watching quietly from the rear.

“M-Mr. Hine?”

A pause. “Milady, please follow the cathedral’s instructions.”

Another pause. “Okay.”

The support I’d sought from him didn’t come. Hine just shook his head a little. He’d helped me get outside, and I knew now that he couldn’t do anything

beyond that. Out of other options, I asked the more seasoned knights a question.

“Err, since we’re going to the Dungeon, might I invite other companions...”

“Companions? Who would you invite?”

“Well, uhh, I’d look in pubs or guilds...”

“I must ask you not to do so. You have us.”

Shot down. Without preparing for an adventure, and without real hardship, I couldn’t relish the thrill or the charm of it at all. Faced with a situation that differed from my favorite adventure tales, I felt time grow static again.

“Then may I bring this?” I asked, showing them my trusty sword. I wasn’t giving up just yet. I used the sword whenever I indulged in quiet playtime, and it was one of the items on my *person*.

“Hold on, you mean the holy relic?”

“I-It’s for self-defense. This celestial sword is perfect for me, is it not?”

“We’re here to defend you, and we’ll do so flawlessly. That won’t be necessary.”

Even my sword was a no-go. The hope I’d obtained was losing its luster fast, and my cheer was crumbling. This was no adventure. I obeyed the knights with a sigh.

Later, even when we entered the Dungeon that I’d yearned for, my spirits weren’t lifted. And it was little wonder—any time I tried to do the slightest thing, the knights interjected.

“Please fall back, milady.”

“You mustn’t touch that, milady.”

“I apologize, milady, but we cannot speak.”

So I couldn’t fight, I couldn’t approach or touch anything, and I couldn’t so much as have a chat. *Well then...if that’s the case...THEN WHAT’S THE BLOODY POINT?!*

To be frank, my irritation was reaching its limits. Boredom was causing time to

stretch again. This was just torture. I'd have rather stayed in that room at this rate.

My displeasure was writ on my face, my grimace becoming deeper. My ever-increasing stockpile of frustration was threatening to explode, until...

"Hey, you. You over there, hiding. Show yourself."

My golden eyes spotted him. The boy. I peeked at his stats, and their unusualness had my heart racing again. "Wait, huh?"

Once more, I felt chills on my spine—the good kind. Time stopped dilating, crunching down as my world sped back up. I was elated; I could feel my mood lifting.

The boy before my eyes was the protagonist of an adventure story. His stats told me so, for these were the stats of someone the world was partial to. And yet his current sorry state ran counter to all those tremendous talents. *His aptitude stat exceeds mine, yet he's still just Level 1!*

I grinned. I myself wasn't unaware of how my previously gloomy expression was growing brighter. I could all but hear the bolt from the heavens as the shell that had encased me shattered. That proverbial peal of thunder was a sign. A blank-shooting firearm salute informing me that my story had begun at last.

It wasn't the end for me. For my story. Not yet. There was still more to go...

Maria's Past

The war burned down my hometown, and when I reflected on that fact, my body trembled with remorse.

You heard right. Not sadness. *Remorse*. It was *remorse* that filled my heart.

If it had burned down due to some outrageous injustice I had nothing to do with, I could get by simply cursing my misfortune, much like my fellow slaves sobbing right next to me. But things were different for me. In my case, it wasn't bad luck but the consequences of my choices that had ushered in this state of affairs. As such, I had no right to curse my fate or to cry.

Maybe that was why, despite all my trembling, my hand moved smoothly

when I caressed the head of a girl around my age who was weeping next to me. The girl, however, wouldn't stop crying. She just kept on weeping without a word, her tears a never-ending stream from her despair-steeped eyes. And who could blame her? This was a slave transport carriage.

The carriage was crammed with slaves of many races, young and old, male and female. Including me, almost everybody here had lost their hometown. Robbed of their freedom, left without hope. They were living sacrifices who existed to enrich the already rich. My tender caress meant nothing in the face of that reality.

Words spilled from my mouth. "I'm sorry..."

I needed to apologize, I thought, and not just because I couldn't prevent a single one of the girl's tears from rolling down her cheeks. There were more things I wanted to apologize for. And that apology was also meant for all of the people whose sorrow was caused by my eyes.

In my hometown, a great many had died. First, it was my parents and older brother, then my friends in the village. Then the knights who'd come to save the village, and the enemy troops on the opposite side of the war. To a man, they'd been tossed into the pit of misfortune thanks to my meddling.

Naturally, I came to think of my becoming a slave as just deserts.

The carriage trundled on, and in my heart, I repeated "this is what I deserve" again and again. I decided I'd refrain from *seeing* anything and live my life as a powerless slave. I averted my all-too-probing eyes from the girl beside me, gazing off into space instead.

I watched the flapping of the cloth drooping over the carriage entrance. Figuring that I ought not to look at people anymore, I turned my attention to what little of the outside scenery I could make out through the gap in that cloth. It was good, clear weather without a cloud in the sky. I mused to myself how lovely the sky looked before shaking that thought and chiding myself that I didn't have the right to soothe my soul by smelling the roses.

I'd heard Vart was relatively rough in terms of public order, so I was surprised. The townscape was more peaceful than I'd been anticipating. It was certainly true that there were droves and droves of Dungeon divers here, but the vibe

wasn't imposing, and it didn't make you feel small. In fact, it was brimming with life and energy. To tell the truth, it seemed to me like my hometown was the more dangerous and shady of the two places. If people were able to choose where they were born, I reckoned most anybody would pick Vart.

Ahh, if only I'd been born in this country, then maybe I'd be leading a blissful life with my family right now...

I continued taking in the view of the town passing by as my head entertained such meaningless what-ifs.

There was a shop that looked like it was for Dungeon divers. Then there were buildings that were trendier and more chic than I was used to, growing up in the countryside. The folk walking about town wore cheerful expressions, quite unlike the faces within the carriage. There were a lot of people ambling here and there. Children were laughing boisterously, while grown-ups were telling them off for it. I saw divers and merchants, men and women, and amidst it all, my eyes picked up on something that made me uncomfortable.

It was a boy with black hair and empty black eyes, and he looked a bit older than me. My heart skipped a beat, but soon the view from inside the carriage shifted away, and I lost sight of him.

"Huh?"

I didn't know why, but I could sense something had changed. I knew from past experience that, once again, my eyes had set fate churning.

There were rational explanations. I could chalk it up to seeing someone with black eyes and black hair, the same as me and my clan. The combination was rare, sure, but it did exist outside my family. In the melting pot that was the Dungeon Alliance, it couldn't be that unheard of. It wasn't really something to worry about. That was what I told myself anyway.

I stopped looking outside, crouching to the floor and screwing my eyes shut. *All I can do is suffer a life of despair and await my eventual end. How could that fate change?*

I screwed my eyes tighter still, willing it all away. I figured I had no other choice. *There's no need to change anything,* I screamed internally.

So I kept my eyes shut, so as not to see anything.

I'd keep them shut the whole time until the carriage came to a halt. After all, if I didn't, then...

Then it'd...



Fate doesn't change.

I crossed paths, for good or for ill, with a black-haired, black-eyed boy. I'd gotten lost within the slave trading house I'd been taken to, having been separated from our handler because I'd fearfully had my eyes closed, refusing to acknowledge the outside world.

And when we crossed paths, my heart skipped a beat again. My eyes were screaming at me: *It's him. It's nobody else but him!*

That was how I got drawn in, and I opened my eyes and took a look at the boy. I could hear the sharp whir of the wheel of destiny, of my fate unfurling. And for the first time in a long while, words that weren't an apology slipped through my lips.

"I'm Maria. My name is Maria," I said, introducing myself despite my feeble voice.

"I'm Sieg."

The instant I heard that voice, the sense hit me—the dawn was finally breaking my long night. It felt like a ray of light cast on a world that had been dark for ages and ages. And so, foolishly, I embraced a newfound hope.

Yes—from that point onward, I began harboring not remorse but hope. That was the juncture where I averted these eyes of mine from the past and took my heels towards the future.

This is the story of one Maria, full of sin, full of greed. At that moment, the bell was ringing on the resumption of my tale.

At the Pub

Early one morning, right after sun-up, at a pub that was still nearly empty, two men were facing each other, seated at a table.

Both of them sported lots of old scars, which told me they were seasoned warriors, and they were conversing with a pointed look in their eyes. If a customer who wasn't in the know were to enter now, there could be little doubt that that roaring ardor rolling off these two would compel them to turn and walk right back out.

"So tell me, pops," said one of the men, the swordsman Krowe, "who or what *is* that kid?"

"He came to me," replied the other man, the pub's proprietor. "I stumbled on him."

Krowe shook his head. "Oh c'mon, none of that, please. Let's not lie, pops. I'm askin' ya for serious."

"Who's lyin'? The putz before him up and quit, so I put up a poster out front. Then the kid took a nice long look at it and drifted right in," he explained in one breath. as if this was wholly unexpected.

"Wait, like, for real?" Upon realizing the man before his eyes was not, in fact, lying, the pointed look in the other man's eyes softened.

"Kid said he needed work 'cause he's got no money. I sized him up, and he seemed capable enough to me, so I hired him then and there."

"So he legit came to you..." said Krowe, staring in wonder. "I totally thought you'd picked him up as some pity hire or something."

Today was a rare day in that the boy about whom they were speaking wasn't there, so Krowe intended to get the lowdown on him, but he hadn't expected an answer that cut-and-dry. It took the wind out of his sails, and he slumped in his chair.

The manager chuckled. "What's the matter? The newbie on your mind that much?"

"I'm curious, okay? You tellin' me you ain't, pops?"

"Sure, maybe a little."

“For one, I’ve got my doubts about the whole ‘drubbed on Floor 1’ story. With those eyes and those reflexes, that just ain’t happenin’,” said Krowe, launching into what he’d been meaning to get into. He’d prepared this line of conversation beforehand in order to corner the manager into spilling more.

“But that’s what he told me,” the manager replied. “And I don’t doubt his word.”

“Don’t get me wrong; I don’t think Sieg’s lyin’ either, exactly. I’ve got more of an eye for character than not. He really was shakin’ in his boots at the thought o’ Floor 1. Despite all his combat talents.”

The name of the boy about whom they were talking was Sieg. He’d started working at the pub several days prior. According to him, he came from a backwater named Fania and had earned himself a nasty burn mark on Floor 1. Krowe had seen those burns with his own eyes, but that didn’t mean he’d swallowed Sieg’s story whole. The intuition he’d built up over his long years of Dungeon diving told him otherwise. That was why he’d come to inquire about the truth from Sieg’s boss.

Yet the man just frowned. “I think he’s got a head for combat too. The way he handles a knife, it’s clear he ain’t average. But ya can’t say for sure he’s suited for Dungeon diving just based offa that, can ya?”

Krowe had expected a counterargument to that effect. “It’s not just that, though. His grasp o’ the space around him ain’t normal either, and that skill’s necessary for diving. He remembers who’s sittin’ where, and no matter what anybody asks o’ him, he deals with it without gettin’ flustered. From day one, mind you! I had half a mind to think he was a veteran worker from a different pub.”

“The newbie ain’t worked any other pubs, least not in Vart. I asked around.”

“Gotta hand it to ya, pops, you settle business stuff fast. I knew it; Sieg’s that good without any experience.”

“I’m usually in the kitchen, so I dunno exactly how he does his thing. He really that amazing?”

“He’s more than just amazing. He’s downright abnormal.”

“I see...” But the older man wasn’t surprised. On some level, he’d expected that of the boy. “So whaddya want from me? You tellin’ me to axe him?”

“No, no, not at all. I got a question for ya, pops.” Krowe’s expression was dead serious. “Would ya mind if you left him to me?”

The manager’s expression remained stern. “So in other words, ya want him in your Dungeon party, huh?”

“I know that in the past, ya lost tons o’ companions to the Dungeon. I’m askin’ ya knowin’ that already. The lad was born to dive.”

“But ain’t it almost time for the Brawl over in the west? I heard you’ll be throwin’ your hat in the ring too. Aren’t ya already too busy?”

“I mean, yeah, I’ll have my work cut out for me, but...”

As a last resort, the manager had brought up the Brawl in the western nation of Laoravia. Everybody in the Alliance who made a living fighting and diving knew about it. It was not only a place for those who boasted about their strength, but also the most prominent festival in all the land.

“Krowe...the newbie can get by without needin’ to become a Dungeon diver. Just wait and see how things go for a little bit longer.”

“So that’s how you feel about it, huh, pops?”

With an expression that belied the way he phrased his request, Krowe’s body slumped fully into his chair and heaved a deep sigh. Quiet ruled the pub and the only two people in it.

From outside the pub’s walls, the hustle and bustle of the streets of Vart were faintly audible. Then, a eureka expression came over Krowe’s face. “I’ve got an idea. How ’bout I invite ol’ Sieg to the Brawl? It’s a team competition this year, so it’s within the rules.”

“Krowe...listen, I’m tellin’ ya, don’t drag him to adult arenas...”

“C’mon, it’s hardly dangerous compared to diving. It’s governed by rules. Besides, we might even win the thing. And if we do, it’d serve as publicity for this pub. We’ll call it a pub that a Brawl winner’s partial to.”

“Win? You and the newbie? Ha ha ha ha, now there’s a knee-slapper.”

“Ya can’t know for sure what might happen!”

“Guess you’re right. Nobody can say what’ll happen. Hypothetically, the newbie could stand at the top of everybody in all the lands. He might have that potential.”

“Right? So put Sieg under my wing.”

“That’s a different story altogether.”

Gone was the tense air that had been there at the beginning, and a cheery, friendly conversation commenced.

Krowe pouted childishly and clicked his tongue. He knew full well he was indulging in a fantasy, so he left the topic of the Brawl at that, and their somewhat acerbic back-and-forth came to a close as the pub reverted to its usual state.



Fate, however, was a checkered thing. Some weeks later, the manager would be forced to go see the Brawl, going as far as closing shop to do so. And he’d even have to apologize to Krowe, telling him in so many words that his eyes hadn’t steered him wrong.

But that was a little later down the line. A story for another time...

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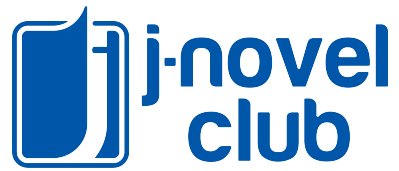
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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 1

by Tarisa Warinai

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